

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2012

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January: The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him. Nahum 1:7

Sunday 1st January 2012 Psalm 34:1-11

Faith Tablets!

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person's strength.

Proverbs 17:22

Our Monthly Memory Verses last year were focused on prayer to assist us in praying properly. As we learn and memorise God's will for ourselves and each other, we can pray boldly and confidently: *So let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it.*^{Heb.4:16(NIRV)} *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*^{1Jn.5:14-15}

This year, our Monthly Memory Verses will help us trust God through every situation because we know what God is like, what He wants, what He thinks, what He says and what He does. January's verse is: **The LORD is good, a Refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him.**^{Nahum 1:7} Whilst just reciting the verse will not automatically produce faith or even change our situation, when we understand the simple yet profound truths in that statement, we will believe God, that is, trust, accept and are confident in Him. *"Affirmations are not a technique to get what you want in life but rather a means of building the truths of God's Word into the life of and consequences of a Believer in dependence on the Holy Spirit"*^{E.W. Kenyon}

Medicines can make us comfortable and relieve the symptoms illness until our body can recover but God's Word really does work in the lives of Believers: *the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13} We must take every opportunity to make our spirit dominate our soul and life: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*^{Ps.42:5}

We can do this by pondering on God's Word and believing what God has said; by praising Him (honouring Him and respecting what he has said) and by not disagreeing with God: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*^{Isaiah 45:9}

It is a great comfort to know that God doesn't have to come from heaven to help us. No! When God hears us and helps us, He is already with us and so we can be sure that help is always available: *Don't you realize that Christ Jesus is in you?*^{2Cor.13:5} *My dear children, you belong to God and have defeated them; because God's Spirit, who is in you, is greater than the devil, who is in the world.*^{1Jn.4:4 (NCV)}

Let's make it our goal to live a peaceful and contented life throughout this year: *I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before Him.*^{Ecd.8:12} *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*^{1Tim.6:6} The NIRV puts it this way: *You gain a lot when you live a godly life. But you must be happy with what you have.*

We can do this because we know that God is good: *You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees (teach me your principles; train me in your goodness; give me knowledge of your rules).*^{Ps.119:68}

Some of the other verses we will learn this year are: *My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.* ^{Ps.119:50} *Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves;* ^{Ps.68:19-20} *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.* ^{Col.3:17}

So this year let us aspire to maturity by determining to make the right choices in every situation *[our] responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ, until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ.* ^{Eph.4:13 (NLT)} *Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right.* ^{Heb.5:14 (NLT)}

***Lord Jesus, Rise up within me and cause me to triumph
and walk in victory every moment of today!***

Wishing you a Blessed New Year as we put God's Word into practice ^{Matt.7:24}

Sunday 8th January 2012 Psalm 34:11f

It Is More Blessed To Give Than To Receive ^{Acts 20:35}

To be **blessed** is to be **happy** (as some Bible versions translate the Beatitudes): *Happy are the poor in spirit: for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are...* ^{Matt.5:3f} True happiness does not come from external stimuli but from within – it is the “feel-good” factor of being content and of helping others. There is a blessing in receiving (especially when you have a need) but there is an even greater blessing in giving. However you cannot give if no one is willing to receive. It is sometimes hard to accept gifts from others, especially gifts of help and encouragement, for we all aspire to be self-sufficient. True fellowship is sharing (a partnership) in giving and receiving: *[the Church at Philippi] entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving.* ^{Phil.4:15(ESV)}

Gift of Dowry

A dowry is a wedding gift: *Abraham said to the man in charge of his household... “I want you to ...get a wife for my son Isaac.” ...Then he brought out silver and gold jewellery and lovely clothing for Rebekah.* ^{Gen.24:1-53} We are the Bride of Christ: *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.* ^{Rev.21:2}

Gold and Silver stand for the building material of our lives: **WISDOM** (applied knowledge): *Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.* ^{Pron.3:13-15}

We should be careful how we build our lives because we will be tested: *But each one should build carefully. No one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid. That foundation is Jesus Christ. A person may build on it using gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay or straw. But each person's work will be shown for what it is. On judgment day it will be brought to light. It will be put through fire. The fire will test how good everyone's work is. If the building doesn't burn up, God will give the builder a reward for his work. If the building burns up, the builder will lose everything. The builder will be saved, but only like one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? God's Spirit lives in you.* ^{1Cor.3:10-16 (NIV)}

We should bless others with God's Wisdom by living a wise life

Gift of Dedication

When David brought the Ark to Jerusalem there was great rejoicing because it represented God being with His people. David then gave presents of food: *David and all*

his men ...brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent... he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. ^{2Sam.6:1-19} **God's Word is our spiritual food:** Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. ^{Matt.4:4}

We should bless others with God's Word by living a Jesus honouring life

Gift of Deliverance

Haman was intending to annihilate the Jewish race but God gave them deliverance: Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, to celebrate annually ...the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies ...when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. ^{Est.9:18-23}

We have been delivered from spiritual death and sin: God has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ^{2Tim.1:9-10}

We should bless others with God's Hope by living a happy life

For I know what I have planned for you,' says the LORD. 'I have plans to prosper you, not to harm you. I have plans to give you a future filled with hope. When you call out to me and come to me in prayer, I will hear your prayers. When you seek me in prayer and worship, you will find me available to you. If you seek me with all your heart and soul, I will make myself available to you,' says the LORD. ^{Jer.29:11-14 (NET)} Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. Those blessings come from the heavenly world. They belong to us because we belong to Christ.... We have been set free because of what Christ has done. Through his blood our sins have been forgiven. We have been set free because God's grace is so rich. He poured his grace on us by giving us great wisdom and understanding. ^{Eph.1:3-8 (NIV)}

Sunday 15th January 2012 Psalm 36

"Jesus Unites, Doctrine Divides!"

This sounds very spiritual and helpful but is actually the opposite of the truth! For 2000 years Jesus has been dividing people. Jesus said: *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.* ^{Matt.10:34} When Jesus ascended to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit, He split the earth in two, dividing it between the Believer and unbeliever; between condemned and justified. *On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south... On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east... and half of it west... in summer and in winter.* ^{Zech.14:4} This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives ^{Acts 1:11-12} Jesus said "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. ^{Jn.7:38-39}

But clear, sound understanding of what the Bible really teaches has united people of all backgrounds and abilities. All Believers should be good **exegetes** (that is, be able to interpret the Bible accurately). The problem we face is: how do we do it? There is

positive exegesis (what the Scriptures are saying) and **negative exegesis** (what the Scriptures are not saying). When interpreting a text we need to determine what the text doesn't say and explore the possibilities of what it could be saying. We should then be able to reject bad doctrines (those doctrines that cannot be supported from the Scriptures or can even be disproved from Scripture). We should also be able to make a reasonable case for our doctrinal position and understand the different positions of others.

Sound doctrine also stops Christianity from being a hard, difficult and divisive. *Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.* ^{2Tim.2:14-15}

We should keep our doctrine based on Scripture and not involve ourselves in *myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith.* ^{1Tim.1:4} *Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.* ^{2Tim.2:23}

The purpose of the Scriptures is to point us to God as revealed in Jesus - they reveal and explain Jesus: *the Scriptures you study give witness about me.* ^{Jn.5:39} Everything God wants us to know about Himself, about ourselves, about life, about death, in fact about any spiritual matter, has already been recorded in the Scriptures for us to read **BUT** the benefits are only available to us through Jesus Christ. If we only see the Bible as an information book or even a spiritual manual we will miss the point of it. The Bible paints pictures of Jesus through real life experiences and it is up to us to apply them to our own situations (either positively or negatively). We see it with Adam who made the wrong choice (disobeyed) contrasted with the Last Adam who made the right choice (obeyed): *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive... The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.* ^{1Cor.15:22-44}. We see it in Noah: *in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. **It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*** ^{1Pet.3:20-22}

These symbolisms or pictures of Jesus carry on right through the O.T. (*the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ* ^{Gal.3:24}) The N.T. is much clearer. In the Gospels, Jesus' own life illustrates God's revelation of Himself. *No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.* ^{Jn.6:46} *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.* ^{Jn.14:9} *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. He has shown us what God is like.* ^{Jn.1:17-18}. The rest of the N.T. explains how to live a life that honours Jesus: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.* ^{1Cor.11:1} *You are to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Let your lives shine brightly before them.* ^{Phil.2:15} ^(NLT) *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* ^{Jn.8:12} *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.* ^{Matt.5:14-16}

Let us believe what God has revealed about Himself and then live like it

Sunday 22nd January 2012 Psalm 37 John 8:1-32

Are You An Eisegete?

Jesus said that that people would never walk in darkness if they followed Him.^{Jn.8:12} He is right about everything and especially this statement but *the Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid."* Jesus answered, *"Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going... In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me."*^{Jn.8:13}

If we agree with God, we will always be right! But this is where the problem has been! We want God to agree with us, instead of us agreeing with God. How we interpret the Bible is important and that's where exegesis comes in. Last week we discussed the importance of being a good **Exegete** – someone who is able to know the intended meaning of a Biblical text. An **Eisegete** is someone who puts meaning into the text of Scripture that may not be the intended meaning and that is the basis of Christian superstition, false doctrine and division in the Church.

Understanding the Bible involves work. *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} This is not strenuous, tiring work (*a fool's work wearies him*^{Ecc.10:15}) but nevertheless there is an effort involved in reading and studying the Bible and we need the Holy Spirit to help us. *No prophecy in Scripture ever came from a prophet's own understanding. It never came simply because a prophet wanted it to. Instead, the Holy Spirit guided the prophets as they spoke.*^{2Pet.1:20-21 (NIRV)} God has also given us people who can help us: *[They] instructed the people who were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.*^{Neh.8:7-8 (NLT)}

Paul encouraged Timothy to be a good exegete and warned him of others who were eisegetes: *Preach the word. Be ready to serve God in good times and bad. Correct people's mistakes. Warn them. Cheer them up with words of hope. Be very patient as you do these things. Teach them carefully. The time will come when people won't put up with true teaching. Instead, they will try to satisfy their own longings. They will gather a large number of teachers around them. The teachers will say what the people want to hear. The people will turn their ears away from the truth. They will turn to stories that aren't completely true.*^{2Tim.2:2-4 (NIRV)}

Scripture is the best commentary on Scripture and we need to compare Scripture with Scripture **BUT** we must understand that the Bible has Old and New Testaments (Covenants) and that Jesus has divided the world between those with eternal life and those without (Believers and Unbelievers).

John wrote that there are 3 witnesses to the fact God that has given us eternal life in Jesus: **Water, Blood and Spirit.** *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*^{1Jn.5:5-12}

The **Water** represents Jesus birth – He came from heaven as a human to be Christ our Saviour. *No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Jn.3:13 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. Jn.6:38*

The **Blood** represents Jesus death – He died vicariously (as our Substitute, in our place). *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. Is.53:5*

The **Spirit** affirms Jesus. *But I will send you the Counsellor—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will tell you all about me. Jn.15:26*

We now have this truth in our head and our heart: *All who believe in the Son of God know in their hearts that this testimony is true. ¹Jn.5:10 (NLT)*

but we must trust God not our conscience: *My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ¹Cor.4:4*

Jesus said, *‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ ^{Jn.8:31}*

Stop doubting and believe! ^{Jn.20:27}

Sunday 29th January 2012 Psalm 37:23-40. John 8:31-40

Family Traits

Who is your father?

Family traits and characteristics such as colour, size and shape can be traced back many generations which is especially helpful when breeding animals to a type. Some animals have recorded pedigrees stretching back hundreds of years. All Thoroughbred horses can trace their pedigrees back to three stallions originally imported into England in the 17th and 18th centuries: the Byerley Turk (1680s), the Darley Arabian (1704), and the Godolphin Arabian (1729). [*Byerley Turk was captured from the Turks by Captain Robert Byerley at the Battle of Buda (1686) – a war in Hungary by the Holy League (consisting of Holy Roman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Venetian Republic and the Tsardom of Russia) against the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, as part of the follow-up campaign in Hungary after the Battle of Vienna. The Holy League took Buda (Budapest) after a long siege*]

Although our physical traits are hereditary, our emotional traits are imprinted before birth or imparted soon afterwards and can be changed – **we need not be imprisoned by our emotions and personality!** There is something more powerful than our circumstances and our soul. We can know freedom from our past and our personality problems. Even Esau, who sold his inheritance for a bowl of broth, was blessed with the option of shaking off his past: *It was by faith that Isaac blessed his two sons, Jacob and Esau. He had confidence in what God was going to do in the future. Heb.11:20 ^(NIV) You will live by the sword. And you will serve your brother. But you will grow restless. Then you will throw off the heavy load he put on your shoulders. ^{Gen.27:40 (NIV)}*

Like David, we must learn to make our God nature (spirit) dominate our natural nature (soul) *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? ^{Ps.42:5} So how do we do it? David gives us the answer in the next line: Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God. ^{Ps.42:5}*

God's Spirit with our spirit can always overcome our soul: *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ¹Jn.4:4* and **God's Word in us (faith) can always overcome the world:** *for everyone*

born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.^{1Jn.5:4-5}

However it is important that we learn from others – that we use good faithful Believers as role models and let them become our “fathers” by imparting godly values and goals to us. We want people who will help us not hinder us, who will stick with us not run away when hardship comes. *A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.*^{Jn.10:12-13(NLT)}

There are plenty of people who want to be mere guardians but true “fathers” are rare: *I am not writing these things to shame you, but to warn you as my beloved children. For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you. So I urge you to imitate me. That's why I have sent Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. He will remind you of how I follow Christ Jesus, just as I teach in all the churches wherever I go.*^{1Cor.4:14-17}

People can appear “spiritual” and may even have some gifting but if they don't develop their character they won't stay the pace or finish the race! Although a *gift opens the way and ushers the giver into the presence of the great,*^{Prov.18:16} it is our character (diligence) that will sustain us: *diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labour.*^{Prov.12:24}

When King Saul began to prophesy, he looked every part a prophet but one wise man asked who his father was: *When all those who had formerly known Saul saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, “What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?” A man who lived there answered, “And who is their father?”*^{1Sam.10:12} Unlike his successor David, King Saul was not diligent and did not make his spirit overcome his natural emotions (his soul). David's lament at Saul's death was that *the shield of Saul will no longer be anointed with oil.*^{2Sam.1:21 (NLT)} i.e. Saul's faith (shield) had no anointing (of the Holy Spirit).

Although we may not have so called “spiritual giants” (whoever they may be) to be our “father” to help us, we do have the same Father as Jesus that we can call on: *This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven.*^{Matt.6:9} *So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy have the same Father.*^{Heb.2:11(NLT)} *Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*^{Jn.20:17}

What spiritual family traits can others see in you? What likeness to our “Elder Brother” Jesus do you have? Do you speak like Him or behave so much like Him that people mistake you for Jesus? If not, try imitating Him.

You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.^{Phil.2:5 (NIV)} *And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.*^{1Cor.11:1} *God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*^{Heb.6:10-12}

February: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13

Sunday 5th February 2010 Psalm 39

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him.

^{Nah 1:7}

We are living in a Postmodern Society which basically means that our Society has no definite terms, no boundaries and no absolute truths! This view is promoted through our education, media and entertainment. No one has the authority to define truth or impose upon others their ideas of moral right and wrong. This is not new: *History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, 'Here is something new!' But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.* ^{Ecc.1:9-11 (NLT)}

So when we state that Jesus is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through [Him]* ^{Jn.14:6} we face the same reaction that Jesus did: *You are trying to kill me because I told you the truth... I am telling you the truth... But you don't listen because you don't belong to God.* ^{Jn.8:40-47 (NLT)}

But we can and do state with confidence: *I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.* ^{2Tim.1:12} Although this assurance makes us different from the society we live in, actually people are crying out for hope and a sense of security that the world cannot provide. We need to assert clearly and joyfully our faith in God through Jesus Christ: *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.* ^{Heb.6:19}

The LORD is good

We must be clear about God's nature: He is good and there is no bad or evil in Him: *God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone,* ^{Jas.1:13} David encouraged the people to sing: *Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.* ^{1Chron.16:34} and prayed to God: *You are good, and what you do is good; Teach me your orders.* ^{Psa.119:68 (NIRV)} So we can always trust God to turn our situation around for our good and His glory: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* ^{Rom.8:28}

One of the Hebrew words for Praise is *Yadah* from where we get Judah and it literally means to throw out your hand: *You are my God, and I will praise (Yadah) you; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks (Yadah) to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.* ^{Psa.118:28-29}

In praise we lift our hands to God, reaching out and asserting that He is good; we never lift our hands to God in anger or resentment, shaking our fist at Him: *For they shake their fists at God, defying the Almighty.* ^{Job.15:25}

A refuge in times of trouble

God is a refuge or stronghold. This word is translated twice as **helmet**: *Ephraim is my helmet; (the defence of my head.* ^{ASV)Psa.60:7} In our spiritual armour we have *the helmet of salvation* ^{Eph.6:17} to protect us. God can and does intervene to protect us but He also expects us to wear our **helmet** (our defence of our minds). We must know that we are saved and to think that way too! We are saved **from** sin (i.e from sin's control, influence and consequences) but we are also saved **for** God (i.e. we now belong to Him). We need to renew our mind-set, our outlook, our world-view, because we now belong to God: *Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.* ^{Jn.8:47} An **Expatriate** is someone who lives in a different country from where they are a citizen. They live with home values and customs in a foreign land and so never really

integrate. If a Christian tries to live as an **Expat** from the world (i.e. keep their pre-Christian values and customs) they will always have unnecessary difficulties. We must live as citizens of heaven whilst here on earth – a **heavenly Expat**: *I have told you those things many times before. Now I say it again with tears in my eyes. Many people live like enemies of the cross of Christ. The only thing they have coming to them is death. Their stomach is their god. They brag about what they should be ashamed of. They think only about earthly things. But we are citizens of heaven. And we can hardly wait for a Saviour from there. He is the Lord Jesus Christ.* ^{Phil.3:18-20 (NIV)}

He cares for those who trust in Him

God's care is based on His knowledge of us. Other translations put it this way: *God knows (is close to and protects) those who seek refuge in him.* Another version states: *He recognizes and welcomes anyone looking for help.* Yes God knows all about us: *O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD.* ^{Ps.139:1-4(NLT)}

Like Moses, we can state that *the person who rests in the shadow of the Most High God will be kept safe by the Mighty One.* ^{Ps.91:1(NIV)}

Don't be intimidated by Postmodern Society

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. ^{Phil.1:4-6}

Sunday 12th February 2012. Psalm 40 John 9

How Good Is Your Eyesight?

The eyesight of many people deteriorate as they get older and they need to wear glasses or have surgery, with some even losing their sight altogether. Solomon encourages us to remember our Creator before this happens: *Remember the One who created you. Remember him while you are still young. Think about him before ...the sunlight become[s] dark... [before] those who look through the windows... [can't] see very well.* ^{Ecc.12:1-5 NIV}

Blindness makes people rely, at least to some extent, on others. There are great helps available such as guide dogs, braille, audio-books etc. but blindness is described as a disability. However some exceptional people are able to rise far above their disabilities. Fanny Crosby (1820 – 1915) was one of these and she knew all the presidents during her lifetime except George Washington, with many becoming good friends of hers. But Fanny never mastered Braille, blaming her calloused guitar fingers and if she wanted to know what a book said, people would read to her, and the contents were stamped on her memory! She was a preacher, teacher and lecturer as well as a hymn writer, harpist and organist. She was called the “*Mother of modern congregational singing in America*” and wrote more than 8000 hymns, many of which are sung today, as well as over 1000 secular poems. The death of her young daughter inspired the hymn “Safe in the Arms of Jesus”. As a child Fanny wrote this verse: *O what a happy soul am I! Although I cannot see, I am resolved that in this world, Contented I will be. How many blessings I enjoy, That other people don't. To weep and sigh because I'm blind, I cannot and I won't!*

When Jesus and His disciples encountered a blind man they asked Him why he was blind - who's fault was it? Many translations imply that God made the man blind so Jesus could heal him: *This happened so that God's work could be shown in his life.* ^{Jn.9:3} Does God cause misfortune so He can step in and rectify it, for His glory? The New

Testament has no such teaching. What Jesus actually said was "***Never mind who or what is to blame; let the works of God be manifested***" then He healed the man.

This historical event has practical and spiritual applications for us.

We believe in a Full or "Foursquare" Gospel, proclaiming **Jesus as Saviour, Baptiser, Healer and King**. Jehovah Rapha (*for I am the LORD, who heals you*^{Ex.15:26}) is revealed as the Word that God sent to heal the people.^{Ps.107:20} *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*^{Acts 10:38} Jesus sent His followers out to do the same: *Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.*^{Lk.9:1-2} *And these signs will accompany those who believe: ...they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.*^{Mk.16:17-18} We must obey Jesus. "Let the works of God be manifest!" It is a command.

But this story also has a spiritual application: *Jesus said, "I have come into this world to judge it. I have come so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this. They asked, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin. But since you claim you can see, you remain guilty.*^{Jn.9:39-41}

Spiritual blindness is more than a disability – it is death. If we can't see Jesus as the Son of God we will never live: *I told you that you would die in your sins. Do you believe that I am the one I claim to be? If you don't, you will certainly die in your sins.*^{Jn.8:24}

Although unbeliever's minds are blinded (veiled) to the Gospel, spiritual sight comes when we turn to Jesus: *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*^{2Cor.4:3-4} *But their minds were made stubborn (hardened or dull). To this very day, the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. The veil has not been removed. Only faith in Christ can take it away. To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. **But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.***^{2Cor.3:14-16} Revelation (literally *un-veiling*) comes through reflecting (meditating) on what God has said and remembering Jesus: *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel*^{2Tim.2:7-8}

Spiritual sight enables us to see as God sees: that sin is bad and separates us from God; that only Jesus is our Saviour; that salvation is the result of sins forgiven: *that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*^{Lk.24:27(NKJV)} **Remission means forgiven, sent away, removed, freedom, released.** *He has sent me to proclaim freedom (remission) for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release (remission) the oppressed*^{Lk.4:18} When our blindness goes we can see Jesus as Peter and Thomas did: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*^{Matt.16:16} *"My Lord and my God!"*^{Jn.20:28}

We don't have to physically see Jesus – we can see Him by faith: *Then Jesus told [Thomas], "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen me but still have believed."*^{Jn.20:29}

Can you see clearly or do you have blurred vision?

Sunday 19th February 2012. Psalm 23 John 10

Jesus The Good Shepherd

In spite of the evolutionary theories, man did not evolve from hunter to herdsman. There is no mention of hunters until Noah's great grandson, Nimrod.^(Gen.10:8-9) Adam was an arable farmer^(Gen.2:15) as was his eldest son (Cain).^(Gen.4:2) Adam's 2nd son (Abel) was a shepherd^(Gen.4:2) as were Israel's Patriarchs and so it was natural for God to use Shepherding as a picture of His care for us. The proper pastoral care for animals has many parallels with care for people. A good shepherd can anticipate problems and so avoid most emergencies: *Know the state of your flocks, and put your heart into caring for your herds.*^{Prov.27:23(NLT)} King David's training to be king was as a shepherd: *He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skilful hands he led them.*^{Ps.78:70-2}

Psalm 23, which has brought hope and comfort to millions of people over thousands of years, was written by David as he reflected on his time as a shepherd.

The LORD is my shepherd. He gives me everything I need.^(NIrV) Jesus revealed Himself as the Good Shepherd^{Jn.10:11} who truly cares for us: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*^{1Jn.3:16} Jesus is no thief^{Jn.10:1} stranger^{Jn.10:5} or hireling^{Jn.10:12} but Someone who leads us into spiritual blessings which overflow from us to others.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. Sheep lie down and "chew the cud" which basically means they regurgitate their food and eat it again! God has given us clear instructions on how to succeed: *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*^{Josh.1:8} We must study the Scriptures, talk about them, think about them and apply them! As we talk and share what we believe about God we understand more about our inheritance in Christ: *I pray that you will be active in sharing what you believe. Then you will completely understand every good thing we have in Christ.*^{Phil.1:6 (NIrV)} Another translation puts it this way: *And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it.*

He leads me beside quiet waters (or *waters of rest*). God gives us rest when we trust Him. Trust is not difficult – it is a matter of agreeing with God! i.e. we don't quarrel or argue with Him! *How terrible it will be for anyone who argues with his Maker!*^{Is.45:9(NIrV)} *Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?*^{Amos 3:3} Trust gives us joy, peace and hope: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.15:13}

He refreshes my soul. How tired are you? Take note of Solomon's advice: *A fool's work wearies him,*^{Ecc.10:15} (The Bible defines a fool as someone who ignores God^{Ps.14:1;53:1;Lk.12:20})

He guides me along the right paths for His name's sake. God's ways are right ways and the Holy Spirit is our Guide. But our life should never be "meandering" like a river going around every obstacle – we have been redeemed to live of overcoming and victory *The blood of Christ set you free from an empty way of life.*^{1Pet.1:18} *I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*^{Phil.4:12-13}

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Fear is debilitating and deadly but actually it is only the anticipation of something

that has not yet happened! Because God is with us we should not be afraid. *So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid".*^{Heb.13:6}

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. What comforts you? *Rod* is also translated *sceptre*^{Gen.49:10} (*authority or the right to rule*) and represents the Holy Spirit in us. *Staff* is a walking-stick-cum-shepherd's crook and represents the Scriptures – a real support and help: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165}

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. God does not take us out of trouble but provides for us wherever we are. *The LORD had given [David] peace and rest from all of his enemies who were around him.*^{2Sam.7:1}

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. God's anointing is on the Head (Jesus) but this always causes us to flow-over! *For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within.* (When he said "living water," he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him.)^{Jn.7:38-39(NLT)}

Surely Your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. The word *follow* is usually applied to the *pursuit by enemies* but here it is God's goodness and love that chases us! God's blessings come with such vigour and drive that they will always catch up with us!

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. When you speak of your home, what do you mean? Are you a heavenly Expat? Or do you still think of this earthly life as your main focus. *Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God's right hand in the place of honour and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth.*^{Col.3:1-2}

How well do you know the Good Shepherd?

I know my sheep and my sheep know me^{Jn.10:14}

Sunday 26th February 2012. Psalm 42

(Guest Speaker: Sasha Rodionov Latvia. His sermon is available on cd or from our website under: Who We Are/Diary)

William Wilberforce (1759 – 1833) felt he lived in times when civil society had deteriorated so greatly that people no longer knew how to be nice to others. One of the first initiatives he undertook was the establishment of the **Society For The Reformation of Manners**. We are living in similar times and should remember Paul's exhortation to *do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*^{Gal.6:10}

Christians are God's representatives on earth: *We are Christ's ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you.*^{2Cor.5:20} We should have a reputation for being good-mannered and honourable to everyone not and just our friends: *Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.*^{Matt.5:47(TM)} *When you knock on a door, be courteous in your greeting.*^{Matt.10:12(TM)} *If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal?*

Ethics is behaviour based on a set of beliefs. So for us Believers, our behaviour is influenced and indeed controlled by our faith – about what we believe about God. There are not 2 sets of standards, 1 for the pastor and another for congregation for we are all equal under the headship of Jesus and ministers in the New Covenant: *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.*^{2Cor.3:6} *You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.2:5} So the qualifications for Ministers (Elders and Deacons) in 1Tim.5 and Titus2 are actually God's standards for all of us. God will call us all to account but the

more public our ministry the more we are expected to live up to the highest standards: *Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*^{Jas.3:1} *But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*^{1Cor.9:27(ESV)}

Here are some helpful guidelines: Drive courteously; Acknowledge people with a greeting (and smile!); Saying “please” and “thank you”; Wait patiently to be served; Serve others with courtesy; Increase your value as an employee to your employer by working diligently and going the “extra mile”; Don't give non-Christians lesser service than you would give anyone else; When you make a commitment - honour it! (if you promise to return a phone call in “10 minutes” then do it!).

There is a way back! If we do make mistakes or even wilfully do wrong, there is a way back to God. The Gospel is about forgiveness of sins and restoration: *Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations*^{Lk.24:46-47(ASV)} Remission means dismissal, release, sent away; and the Christian message is that God has separated our sins from us (like a surgeon amputating a limb!). Our sins are no longer attached to us and we are free – free from our sins and also free from the guilt and spiritual consequences of our sins. Isaac Watts in his hymn *Jesus shall reign wherever the sun* writes:

Blessings abound where'er He reigns; the prisoner leaps to lose his chains;

The weary find eternal rest, and all the sons of want are blessed.

Where He displays His healing power, death and the curse are known no more:

In Him the tribes of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost.

Even Esau who treated his family heritage with contempt was able find a way back: *Isaac answered Esau, “I have made Jacob lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants... So what can I possibly do for you, my son?” Esau said to his father, “Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!” Then Esau wept aloud. His father Isaac answered him, “Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. **But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.***^{Gen.27:37f}

Never think that God isn't interested in you or that you are not quite good enough for Him. If you were “good enough” by yourself you would not need God's grace. *So he gave us new life because of what Christ has done. He gave us life even when we were dead in sin. God's grace has saved you. God raised us up with Christ. He has seated us with him in his heavenly kingdom because we belong to Christ Jesus. He has done it to show the riches of his grace for all time to come. His grace can't be compared with anything else. He has shown it by being kind to us because of what Christ Jesus has done. God's grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can brag about earning it. God made us. He created us to belong to Christ Jesus. Now we can do good things. Long ago God prepared them for us to do.*^{Eph.2:5-10(NIV)}

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus... Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.^{Phil.3:12-17}

Let's live up to what we have already attained!

March: I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before Him. Ecclesiastes 8:12

Sunday 4th March 2012. Psalm 82 John 10

Are You Living As A Mere Human Or More Than A Human?

Some people *don't defend the cause of the weak and fatherless [or] maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed... they know nothing, they understand nothing and they walk about in darkness.*^{Ps.82:3-5} Although they are called *sons of the Most High [they] will die like mere men*^{Ps.82:6-7} How sad to have the label of “sons of God” but not to live like God’s family because how we live will determine how we will die!

How do you imagine the next 10 years will work out for you? Most of us will lose loved ones and some of us we will face death ourselves. How will we die? – like a mere human or like a “god” – a *son of the Most High*? We are to make sound godly judgments and decisions like God if we are to live like “gods”. The term “god” is translated “judge” in the NLT which is helpful: *God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment (decisions) among the “gods” (judges^{NLT}).*^{Ps.82:1}

Believers are “sons of God” and have the potential to live spiritually healthy lives that are happy and full of hope. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God belongs to blessed people^(Matt.5:3-10) but in reality some of God's children are still living as slaves: *As long as your own children are young, they are no different from slaves in your house. They are no different, even though they own all of the property... When we were children, we were slaves to the basic things the people of the world believe... Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. He is the Holy Spirit... So you aren't slaves any longer. You are God's children. Because you are his children, he gives you what he promised to give his people.*^{Gal.4:1-7NIV}

If we are to live like God and make decisions or judgements like Him, what is God really like? God often showed His anger against sin in the OT, but Jesus showed us what God was really like and thus made it possible for us to relate to Him. *Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. But God, the one and only Son, is at the Father's side. He has shown us what God is like.*^{Jn.1:14NIV} *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?*^{Jn.14:9NLT} God has always been *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*^{Ex 34:6-7} God is described like that 9 times.^{Ex.34:6; 2Ch.30:9; Ne.9:17; Ps.86:15;103:8;111:4;145:8; Joel2:13; Jonah4:2.}

This is also the description of those who fear God: *Blessed are those who fear the LORD, who find great delight in his commands... Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.*^{Ps.112:1-4}

God’s gracious and compassionate Character is not sentimental or weak for *The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*^{Ps.9:7-9}

God expects us to behave the same: *“How long will you stand up for those who aren't fair to others? How long will you show favour to sinful people? Stand up for those who are weak and for those whose fathers have died. See to it that those who are poor and those who are beaten down are treated fairly. Save the weak and those who are in need. Save them from the power of sinful people.*^{Ps.82:2-4NIV}

Society no longer stands up for the rights of good people; people today have become intolerant of right, of good, of God’s morality. God wants us to return to the simple Gospel of *peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*^{Rom.5:1}. We can only do this if we live as

sons of the Most High and not as mere men. Paul criticised people for living as mere men. He said: *For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?*^{1Cor.3:3} **We can be different without being divisive:** *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.*^{1Cor.11:18-19}

If we do begin to feel despondent or have a defeatist attitude we should praise God (say good and true things about God). We must make our (born-again) spirit dominate our emotions not let our emotions dominate us: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*^{Ps.42:5} By acting righteously we can live as Citizens of God's Kingdom and enjoy the benefits of belonging to God's Family. People today need to experience God in the same way they did through Jesus but their only contact with Him is through us. If we will live like His children we can have the confidence that we will face the end of our life as God's children. This will bring honour to God and hope to the world: *The Spirit of the LORD speaks through me; his words are upon my tongue. The God of Israel spoke. The Rock of Israel said to me: The one who rules righteously, who rules in the fear of God, is like the light of morning at sunrise, like a morning without clouds, like the gleaming of the sun on new grass after rain.*^{2Sam.23:2-4NLT}

Sunday 11th March 2012. Psalm 43

(Ray Teague preaching. Paul at Prieka Vests Church, Riga, Latvia)

Expect a Miracle every day; expect a Miracle when you pray

If you can expect it; God will make a way

To perform a Miracle for you each day!

I Believe In Miracles Because I Believe In God!

God Performs Miracles!

You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.^{Ps.77:14} Christianity is based on the life and teachings of Jesus as presented in Bible. Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, God having become human and the saviour of humanity.^(Wikipedia) **Christianity is 100% supernatural. Jesus' life is miraculous** - His conception, birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension; this could not have happened without God's intervention. **The Bible is miraculous** – to have so many people write it over many hundreds of years and yet it all clearly describes Jesus and our salvation – this could not have happened without God's intervention. **Our Faith is miraculous** – that we can have peace with God although we are born separated from Him (dead in our sins and His enemies) – this could not have happened without God's intervention. So miracles are to be expected and it is no surprise that God intervenes in our lives to help us, heal us or encourage us.

To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth: May you prosper greatly! It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.^{Dan.4:4} *The whole assembly became silent as they listened... about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*^{Acts 15:12} *God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*^{Heb.2:4}

What is a Miracle?

A miracle is when God does something that we cannot do; it is a supernatural intervention pointing to God as its cause. T.L.Osborn states: "**miracles of healing were**

manifested in the early church and the true church has never changed.” “Each Miracle healing becomes undeniable proof that the Gospel is indeed true!” George Canty wrote to me: *Most people coming for healing and receiving cures simply expect it, get what they came for, and don't even come again... About 80% of people for whom we pray have no visible sickness and there is nothing dramatic to witness, or even report. Miracles occur, but only the patients know how real they were. In my Kings Cross campaign, a woman with chronic depression was immediately restored, so much so that her husband beat her up believing she was euphoric over meeting another man... The outsider often has more faith than those in the church. There is a remarkable public attitude towards the miraculous.*

Miracles do not mean we are always right.

Miracles follow those who BELIEVE^{Mark 16:17} not those who are doctrinally right or those who are “spiritual”. **Doctrine (what we believe about God) should be determined by Scripture, not by experience.**

What should our attitude be towards Miracles?

Miracles were a normal part of Jesus' ministry & authenticated His ministry; **Miracles** accompanied and authenticated the Apostles' ministry; **Miracles** do not produce faith; **Miracles** can be counterfeited by satan and deceive people **Miracles** that are “good” or “kind” do not necessarily prove they are from God but the atmosphere in which they happen is a good pointer; **Miracles** are also tools for evangelism - tangible miracles are visible to others and wonderful conversation openers. After all who can keep quiet about a miraculous healing; **Miracles** are a token of God's love; **Miracles** are a means of blessing in themselves especially healing, protection and provision.

When it comes to healing, the most important thing is that something of God is revealed on this poor earth. Hold fast to this and never let go of it. If you have been healed by a miracle, but still continue to give yourself to earthly things, what has been gained? If you lie mortally ill and the Saviour heals you and you take it for granted, thinking only of your family and your business, what good is it? Look up. Look up. There is your prize. When we experience signs and wonders, something must change in us. Let us go to the Saviour in our need and cry to him: “Lord, help us!” But we must also listen to him. And when we have been helped, then let us do the will of God. Let Jesus wrench us out of our earthly ways so that we may have life in his name. Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (www.plough.com)

BUT the greatest Miracle is New Birth – to be born again from God when we were spiritually dead! *“What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again.” “How can I be born when I am old?” Nicodemus asked. “I can't go back inside my mother! I can't be born a second time!” Jesus answered, “What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can enter God's kingdom without being born through water and the Holy Spirit. People give birth to people. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised when I say, ‘You must all be born again.’”*^{Jn.3:3-7NIrV}

Jesus shows what God is like: *Jesus answered... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*^{Jn.14:9} Jesus Miracles showed His deity: *Believe me when I say I am in the Father. Also believe that the Father is in me. Or at least believe what the miracles show about me.*^{Jn.14:11} *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in front of his disciples. They are not written down in this book. But these are written down so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you believe this, you will have life because you belong to him.*^{Jn.20:30-31}

Remember God's Miracles and talk about them. *Ebenezer... Thus far has the Lord helped us.*^{1Sam.7:12}

Use miracles, signs and wonders as conversation openers but worship God not the Miracle: *When I heard this, I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Don't do that! I serve*

God, just as you do. I am God's servant, just like other believers who hold firmly to what Jesus has taught. Worship God! What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy. ^{Rev.19:10(NIrV)} If necessary destroy the "wonder" ie Moses snake – Nu.21:9/2Kings 18:4.

Our faith grows as we walk with God and trust Him. Each experience with God prepares us for the next one (see Moses crossing the Red Sea (*Then the LORD spoke to Moses. He said, "Reach your hand out over the sea. The waters will flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."* ^{Ex.14:26}) and Joshua crossing the river Jordan (*Speak to the priests who carry the ark of the covenant. Tell them, 'When you reach the edge of the Jordan River, go into the water and stand there.'* ^{Joshua 3:8}))

Expect God to perform Miracles: Expectancy is the Atmosphere for Miracles but Miracles do not mean we are "spiritual" - only that God loves us and is displaying His Glory: *That was the first of Jesus' miraculous signs. He did it at Cana in Galilee. Jesus showed his glory by doing it. And his disciples put their faith in him.* ^{Jn.2:11} Maturity is about making the right choices instead of the wrong ones: *But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.* ^{Heb.5:14} We should expect god to do more than we expected: *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* ^{Eph.3:20-21}

Creation shows the power of God, there's glory all around and those who see must stand in awe, for miracles abound.

**I cannot doubt the work of God, it's plain for all to see:
The miracles that he has wrought should lead to Calvary.**

**The love of God! O power divine! 'tis wonderful to see
The miracle of grace performed with-in the heart of me.
*I believe in miracles, I've seen a soul set free
Miraculous the change in one redeemed through Calvary;
I've seen the lily push its way up through the stubborn sod
I believe in miracles for I believe in God!***

Sunday 18th March 2012. Psalm 44:1-8 John 11 Mothering Sunday

I Believe In The Resurrection Of The Body And The Life Everlasting

I believe in God, the Father almighty... I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord... I believe in the Holy Spirit... I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. ^{The Apostles' Creed}

To acknowledge the truth is just plain common sense and not to believe in facts is foolish. Just to acknowledge **God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit** is no great achievement! Neither is it a great accomplishment to acknowledge **the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting**. These are plain facts! But to **BELIEVE** is something different – **BELIEF will make the difference between life and death**. Jesus said: *I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?* ^{Jn.11:25-26} This is quoted at most funeral services because the promise of life gives hope and comfort **but this promise of life is conditional – conditional on "believing in Jesus"**.

What did Jesus mean by I am the resurrection and the life?

Simeon prophesied over Jesus: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.*^{Lk.2:34} The word rising in the Greek is *anastasis* which means **resurrection**. Jesus causes the resurrection of those who believe in Him (even though they die) and the falling of those who do not believe in Him. Jesus was very clear – He is not **a resurrection** but **the resurrection**. He is not **a way** but **the way**: *What I'm about to tell you is true. What if someone does not enter the sheep pen through the gate but climbs in another way? That person is a thief and a robber... I am like a gate for the sheep. All those who ever came before me were thieves and robbers.*^{Jn.:10:1-8(NIrV)} *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*^{Jn.14:6} **Paul was very explicit that a different gospel is a perversion and no gospel at all:** *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!*^{Gal.1:8-9}

The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.

Belief is Faith and faith is a gift from God (a revelation rather than just an agreement with the facts). In other words, faith is more than reading and acknowledging the facts - faith is personally believing God from an inner conviction. When Peter said Jesus was *the Christ, the Son of the living God*. Jesus replied, *'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'*^{Matt.16:16-17} T.L.Osborn says: **Do you have confidence that God tells the truth? Do you have confidence that God does what He says He will do? – That's faith!**

If you really believe in something you will talk about: *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken."*^{Ps.116:10} *With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.*^{2Cor.4:13-14} We talk (and sing) quite a lot about the resurrection of Jesus because this is our Gospel and our hope: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8} Death is one of the few certainties in life but because Jesus has already died, risen from the dead and is alive forever, we can face the future with certainty and confidence.

Whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

Believers (people who are trusting Jesus for their life, who have been born-again into God's Kingdom) have the assurance that their physical death is not the end nor anything to be feared. However, there is a **second death** for those who do not believe in Jesus as the Christ (i.e. believe that Jesus is God's remedy for their separation from God due to sin). This **second death** is final and described as *eternal punishment*,^(Matt.25:41-46) and the fate of *cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshippers, and all liars.*^{Rev.21:8 (NLT)} **For those of us who live by believing in [Jesus], we share in the first resurrection...** *[and] the second death holds no power.*^{Rev.20:6} We are overcomers and *will not be hurt at all by the second death.*^{Rev.2:11} *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*^{Jn.5:24} *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:5}

So

Do you believe this?

Yes, Lord... I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God. I believe that you are the One who was to come into the world.^{Jn.10:27} *But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see*

God! I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!
Job.19:25-27(NLT)

Sunday 25th March 2012. Psalm 45 John 11:45-12:12

How Do You Show Your Appreciation Of Jesus?

Last week we affirmed our belief in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting because Jesus said: *I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying.*^{Jn.11:25(NLT)} But this hope of everlasting life is conditional on our FAITH and is only possible because of Jesus' death: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21} *He suffered the things we should have suffered. He took on himself the pain that should have been ours. But we thought God was punishing him. We thought God was wounding him and making him suffer. But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us.*^{Is.53:4-5(NIRV)}

Martha, Mary's sister, had already stated publicly who Jesus was: *I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.*^{Jn.11:27} Mary had chosen to learn from Jesus: *[She] sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said... [Jesus said she] has chosen what is better. And it will not be taken away from her.*^{Lk.10:39-42}

But now it was time for Mary to express her appreciation of Jesus – her worship. The English word “worship” comes from the old English “weorthscipe” or “worth-ship”. When we worship God we are expressing the value we have put on God – what He is worth to us!

When Mary poured the expensive perfume on Jesus, there was no criticism of her from the host (Simon), only from Judas and some of the other disciples!^{Matt.26:8} How different from a couple of years earlier when Simon had *invited Jesus to have dinner with him*^{Lk.7:36} and he had been reprimanded: *[Jesus] said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”*^{Lk.7:44-47} It seems that Simon had grown in the faith and that this meal was to show his appreciation to Jesus for healing his leprosy and forgiving his sins.

Mary's dramatic demonstration of her appreciation was emotional, physical and prophetic. Our appreciation of Jesus' death (with the resulting forgiveness of sins as well as all the other benefits of peace with God) should also be emotional and physical and prophetic.

Emotional: Mary's brother had been raised from the dead and it appears that she knew Jesus was about to die so she was obviously going to be emotional. But she was also emotional about her sins being forgiven.^{Lk.7:47} The 1st and greatest commandment is to **love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind.**^{Matt.22:37} If we really understood the consequences of sins forgiven we would not just be emotional but ecstatic! No punishment, no rejection, no shame, no (spiritual) death, no domination by sin, no (spiritual) poverty, no domination by sickness, no curse, no guilt, no condemnation and no fear! **Instead we have peace with God** resulting in acceptance, glory, life, righteousness, riches, health and blessing. **What a great exchange!**

Physical: Mary's display of appreciation was physical – she didn't just think about Jesus nor did she keep her response “spiritual” – she did something physical. True spirituality is practical. We serve Jesus as we serve others: *Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*^{Matt.25:40} *Obey your earthly masters in everything you do. Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. Serve them sincerely because of your reverent fear of the Lord. Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and that the Master you are serving is Christ.*^{Col.3:22-24(NLT)} *God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.4:10-11(NLT)}

Prophetic: Mary's act of worship was in anticipation of Jesus death - it was prophetic and pointed to Jesus imminent sacrificial death. Remember: *the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10(NLT)} Jesus said that *when she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.*^{Matt.26:12} Our worship should always give a clear witness for Jesus and an appreciation of Jesus great sacrifice.

So, How do you show your appreciation of Jesus?

April: My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.

Ps.119:50

Sunday 1st April 2012. Psalm 46

Do You Understand The Way To Peace?

How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes... because you did not accept your opportunity for salvation.^{Lk.19:42-44(NLT)}

Jesus life was not haphazard or random but every moment was precisely planned and carried out in order that He could be clearly identified as the Christ – God's answer to the world's problems. The miracles Jesus performed were a blessing in themselves to those who were healed but each one pointed to His Deity: *But these [miraculous signs] are written down so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you believe this, you will have life because you belong to him.*^{Jn.20:31(NIrV)}

Jesus was born a king^{Matt.2:2} **and died a king**^{Matt.2:11;37} but He said: *“My kingdom is not part of this world. If it were, those who serve me would fight. They would try to keep the Jews from arresting me. My kingdom is from another place.”* *“So you are a king, then!”* said Pilate. Jesus answered, *“You are right to say I am a king. In fact, that's the reason I was born. I came into the world to give witness to the truth. Everyone who is on the side of truth listens to me.”*^{Jn.18:36-37(NIrV)} **Jesus and His claims must be believed and received - His kingdom is not imposed on us but has to be accepted.** *He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*^{Jn.1:10-13(NLT)}

Horses are for war in the picture language of the Bible: *“Job, do you give horses their strength? Do you put flowing manes on their necks? ...They are filled with joy. They charge at their enemies. They laugh at fear. They are not afraid of anything. They do not run away from swords. Many arrows rattle at their sides. Flashing spears and javelins are also there. They are so stirred up that they eat*

up the ground. They can't stand still when trumpets are blown. When they hear the trumpets they snort, 'Aha!' They catch the smells of battle far away. They hear the shouts of commanders and the battle cries.^{Job39:19-25}

Jesus is seen riding a horse when He releases the fierce wrath of God: *I saw heaven standing open. There in front of me was a white horse. Its rider is called Faithful and True. When he judges or makes war, he is always fair. His eyes are like blazing fire. On his head are many crowns. A name is written on him that only he knows. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood. His name is The Word of God.*^{Rev.19:11-13(NIrV)}

Donkeys depict peace which is why Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey: *"City of Zion, be full of joy! People of Jerusalem, shout! See, your king comes to you. He always does what is right. He has the power to save. He is gentle and riding on a donkey. He is sitting on a donkey's colt. I will take the chariots away from Ephraim. I will remove the war horses from Jerusalem. I will break the bows that are used in battle. Your king will announce peace to the nations. He will rule from ocean to ocean.*^{Zech.9:9-10(NIrV)}

Jesus came to bring us peace and unite us with God: *Before you believed in Christ, you were separated from him. You were not considered to be citizens of Israel. You were not included in what the covenants promised. You were without hope and without God in the world. At one time you were far away from God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. He spilled his blood for you. That has brought you near to God. Christ himself is our peace. He has made Jews and non-Jews into one group of people. He has destroyed the hatred that was like a wall between us. Through his body on the cross, Christ put an end to the law with all its commands and rules. He wanted to create one new group of people out of the two. He wanted to make peace between them. He planned to bring both of them as one body back to God because of the cross. Christ put their hatred to death on that cross. He came and preached peace to you who were far away. He also preached peace to those who were near. Through Christ we both come to the Father by the power of one Holy Spirit.*^{Eph.2:12-18(NIrV)}

Pilate's question of *"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?"*^{Matt.27:22} is a question each of us has to answer. Most of the Jews of Jesus time did not accept their opportunity for salvation. But it is not too late for us – yet!

He suffered the things we should have suffered. He took on himself the pain that should have been ours. But we thought God was punishing him. We thought God was wounding him and making him suffer. But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us.^{Is.53:4-5(NIrV)}

As we affirm "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!"^{Jn.12:13} **let's make sure we don't deny Jesus when it is inconvenient and the crowd's shouts prevail.**^{Lk.23:23} *Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*^{Lk.9:23-26}

Sunday 8th April 2012. Psalm 47 Easter Sunday

Christ Is Risen – He Is Risen Indeed: The Blessing Of Believing!

Blessed are those who have not seen me but still have believed.^{Jn.20:29} **A Christian is someone who believes Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.**^{Jn.20:31} However this "belief" is subjective (personal to the individual) and so it is impossible to actually prove whether someone is

really a “believer”. Actually we are not meant to segregate people into “true believers” and “false believers” as Jesus explained in Matthew 13: *‘Do you want us to go and pull the weeds up?’* “No,” the owner answered. *‘While you are pulling up the weeds, you might pull up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the workers what to do.’* ^{Matt.13:24-30} Paul gave directions to examine ourselves not others: *Everyone ought to examine themselves.* ^{1Cor.11:28} *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.* ^{2Cor.13:5}

All of us go through difficult times and sometimes we are more concerned about our situation than we should be. In spite of God’s instructions to us, occasionally our concerns slip into worry or anxiety: *‘I tell you, do not worry. Don't worry about your life and what you will eat or drink. And don't worry about your body and what you will wear. Isn't there more to life than eating? Aren't there more important things for the body than clothes? ...Your faith is so small!’* *‘So don't worry. Don't say, ‘What will we eat?’ Or, ‘What will we drink?’ Or, ‘What will we wear?’ People who are ungodly run after all of those things. Your Father who is in heaven knows that you need them. ‘But put God's kingdom first. Do what he wants you to do. Then all of those things will also be given to you. ‘So don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.’* ^{Matt.6:25-34(NIrV)} *So then, banish anxiety from your heart.* ^{Ecc.11:10} *Cast all your anxiety on him (give all your worries and cares to God^(NLT), turn all your worries over to him^(NirV) because he cares for you.* ^{1Pet.5:7}

If we do slip into worry or anxiety, we haven’t “lost” our faith – we have just taken our eyes off God and His promise of love, protection and provision. This is very different from those mentioned in Matthew 13 who “don’t produce a crop” - those who don’t understand, have no root, or are choked with worries. ^{Matt.13:18-22} **BUT if we don’t deal with our worry, it will choke us.** So how do we produce a crop? ^{Matt.13:23} - by hearing the word and understanding it. ^{Matt.13:23} **The Gospel is Simple, Settled and Spiritual!** If we are to enjoy the blessings of believing we must choose right from wrong ^{Heb.5:14} and to make the right choices we must know what is right. Jesus said: *Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.* ^{Matt.11:29-30(NLT)}

The Bible is our only reference point for understanding God. Theological books are good but they are some else’s thoughts on God (and mostly too complicated to understand!) Testimonies are good but they someone else’s experience of God. The Bible is God’s written testimony of Jesus and is more certain than even our own experience: *We also have the prophetic message [of Scripture] as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.* ^{2Pet.1:19}

The Bible is simple but none of us are as knowledgeable about the important parts as we could be and probably more knowledgeable about the incidental parts than we need to be. So what must we understand – know with certainty, conviction and able to explain to others with credibility?

Know that Jesus is the Christ. *But these [miraculous signs] are written down so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you believe this, you will have life because you belong to him.* ^{Jn.20:31(NIrV)}

Know that Jesus is the Son of God. *At once Saul began to preach in the synagogues. He taught that Jesus is the Son of God... But Saul went on increasing in power, and the Jews in Damascus were not able to give answers to the arguments by which he made it clear that Jesus was the Christ.* ^{Acts9:20-22}

Know that Jesus is raised from the dead. To the disciples Jesus resurrection seemed as *nonsense*^{Lk.24:11} and *foolish*.^{Lk.24:25} He rebuked them for their *lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe in the resurrection*^{Mk.16:14} and told Thomas to *stop doubting*.^{Jn.20:27} **But it is essential we know and believe that Jesus is alive.** *And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives... And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him. When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.*^{Rom.6:4-11(NLT)}

So how do I know I have enough faith? When Jesus disciples asked for more faith, Jesus explained that they didn't need *lots of faith but living faith* – faith that is linked to obedience: “*We need more faith; tell us how to get it.*” “*Even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed,*” the Lord answered, “*you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘May God uproot you and throw you into the sea,’ and it would obey you! ...when you obey me you should say, ‘We are not worthy of praise. We are servants who have simply done our duty.’*”^{Lk.17:5-10(NLT)}

God has done everything for our salvation and wholeness through Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension – now it is up to us to believe (accept) what He has done. *Blessed (truly happy inside) are those who believe.*^{Jn.20:29} **Easter is a blessed and happy time** and as we celebrate Jesus resurrection as explained in the Scriptures^{Lk.24:32} we too will find that our *hearts feel strangely warm*^{Lk.24:32(NLT)}

Sunday 15th April 2012. Psalm 48. John 21

What to do if you are in the Doldrums and feel Despondent or Disheartened

Although Peter was **Impulsive** (he climbed out of the boat when Jesus walked on the water^{Matt.14:22-23}); **Blessed** (he had the revelation from God that Jesus was the Christ the Son of the Living God^{Matt.16:16f}); **Privileged** (he saw Jesus transfigured and heard God speak from heaven^{Lk.19:28f; 2Pet.1:16f}); **Extreme** (don't just wash my feet – wash my head and feet as well^{Jn.13:9f}); **Loyal** (he said that he would never deny Jesus even if everyone else did^{Mk.14:29}); **Protective** (he cut off Malchus' ear^{Jn.18:10}), he was not so brave as he thought he was. Peter deserted Jesus^{Mk.14:50} and then denied knowing Him^{Jn.18:17;25;27}). He even kept his distance from Jesus when He was dying,^{Lk.23:49} however, Peter was full of remorse and afterwards wept bitterly.^{Lk.22:62}

Imagine how Peter felt after Jesus had died: despondent; dejected; disheartened; downcast; guilt-ridden and a lot more negative emotions too! The Disciples had thought Jesus was the Messiah who was going to redeem Israel,^{Lk.24:21} but now all their hopes were dashed. So when Mary said she had seen Jesus alive, Peter ran to the grave to check it out.^{Jn.20:1f} Although Peter was there when Jesus appeared to the Disciples later that night and also a week later when Thomas' doubts were dispelled,^{Jn.20:24} there is no record that Jesus had any personal or individual conversation with Peter at that time.

Jesus had arranged to meet the Disciples in Galilee^{Mk.16:7} and so they went back home – about 100 miles journey taking at least 4 days to walk! It was here in a familiar and safe setting, together with fellow believers, that Jesus met with Peter and reinstated him. Once restored, the Impulsive, Blessed, Privileged, Extreme, Loyal and Protective Peter was ready to take the lead again.

Here are some important principles for getting back on track when you are in the doldrums and feel despondent, disheartened or downcast:

The adage *If you have a need, sow a seed!* is very relevant when you are facing a crisis, (even a near-crisis!) or feeling despondent, dejected, disheartened, downcast or guilt-ridden. David learnt what to do when his soul was downcast and disturbed within him – he put his hope in God and praised God as his Saviour: *Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God - soon I'll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He's my God.*^{Ps.42:11; 43:5TM} We should always praise God (*I will thank the LORD at all times. My lips will always praise him.*^{Ps.34:1NLT}) But often we need to do something to help us get to that place.

First: Do something physical, practical and personal. It is very comforting and relaxing to do something physical that you are familiar with. It brings back memories of the “good old days” whilst (hopefully) forgetting the bad times! Peter went fishing – it was his family business so he could do this without having to concentrate or use his brain too much. For you it might be walking on the beach or in the woods; maybe knitting and listening to familiar music; digging the garden; chopping logs; riding a horse (or bicycle).

Second: Keep in fellowship with Believers. Choose your close friends carefully because they will either draw you closer to God or draw you further away from God. Our fellowship is in the Holy Spirit^{2Cor.3:14} and we need each other's encouragement to keep the faith. *Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands? Who would think of setting up pagan idols in God's holy Temple? But that is exactly what we are, each of us a temple in whom God lives. God himself put it this way: "I'll live in them, move into them; I'll be their God and they'll be my people. So leave the corruption and compromise; leave it for good," says God. "Don't link up with those who will pollute you. I want you all for myself. I'll be a Father to you; you'll be sons and daughters to me."*^{2Cor.6:14-18TM}

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners will have no place among the godly. For the LORD watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.^{Ps.1 NLT}

Remember it is **living faith** that counts **not lots of faith** and **living faith obeys God:** *Even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed... it would obey you! ...when you obey me you should say, ...We are servants who have simply done our duty.*^{Lk.17:10(NLT)}

Jesus not only made a way back to God but **He is the Way**^{Jn.14:6} - **so there is always a way back to God. Peter made it back and so can we.**

Change your life, not just your clothes. Come back to GOD, your God. And here's why: God is kind and merciful. He takes a deep breath, puts up with a lot, this most patient God, extravagant in love, always ready to cancel catastrophe.^{Joel.2:13}

Sunday 22nd April 2012. Psalm 49:1-9. John 21

What Do You Do After You Recover From The Doldrums?

The best way to recover from feeling despondent, dejected or disheartened is to put our hope in God and praise Him as our Saviour: *Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God - soon I'll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He's my God.*^{Ps.42:11; 43:5TM} But most people who are despondent are unable

to do that which is why they are in their predicament in the first place! Actually a lifestyle of praise (telling the truth about God^{Lk.23:47} and saying good things about Him) will stop us getting disheartened in the first place. **Make a habit of giving thanks to God in every situation**^{Eph.5:20; Col.3:17} - a habit is something we do automatically and without thinking.

To live happy, cheerful and enheartened lives we must look after our whole person - *spirit, soul and body*^{1Thes.5:23} (in that order). It is not enough just to **think positive thoughts** - we must **do something positive (and spiritual)**. Sharing our faith^{Philemon 1:6} (what we believe and know about God) is a sure way of to recover from emotional and spiritual fatigue: *Jesus said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work... Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour."*^{Jn.4:32-38}

Last week we saw that Peter did something **physical, practical and personal** (for him it was fishing) **with fellow Believers** and Jesus not only met with him but restored him. The next part of the story in John chapter 21 shows us what to do after we have recovered from feeling disheartened.

First, Affirm our love for Jesus: *Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."*^{Jn.21:15}

Love is not an emotion (but it is emotional!) - **love is a commitment**. Love is the basis for marriage which makes it much more than a civil contract or social convenience. Marriage is a holy covenant where a man and a woman make a sacred commitment before God to respect, love, comfort, honour and keep one another in sickness and in health and, forsaking all others, stay faithful to each other for as long as they are both alive. Our love for Jesus is also a **holy covenant** to respect love and honour Jesus and staying faithful to him until death unites us. (**Actually marriage is modelled on Christ's love for us!**) *So we know that God loves us. We depend on it. God is love. Anyone who leads a life of love shows that he is joined to God. And God is joined to him. So love is made complete among us. We will be bold on the day God judges us. That's because in this world we love as Jesus did. There is no fear in love. Instead, perfect love drives fear away. Fear has to do with being punished. The one who fears does not have perfect love. We love because he loved us first. Anyone who says he loves God but in fact hates his brother or sister is a liar. He doesn't love his brother or sister, whom he has seen. So he can't love God, whom he has not seen. Here is the command God has given us. Anyone who loves God must also love his brothers and sisters.*^{1Jn.4:16-21}

Let's re-affirm our love for Jesus and so avoid the criticism Jesus made of the Church at Ephesus: *But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.*^{Rev.2:4-5NLT}

Second, Care for other Believers: *Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*^{Jn.21:15}

Jesus had explained that a good shepherd cares for his sheep and protects them with his life: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. The hired man ... does not care about the sheep ... I have other sheep that do not belong to this sheep pen. I must bring them in too. They also will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd.*^{Jn.10:11-16} Now Jesus was asking Peter (and also us) to do the same. This caring for others is not just for

Pastors but for all of us. We all have a ministry of helping others believe in Jesus and live happy, cheerful and enheartened lives where God's kingdom and His righteousness is a priority. *But put God's kingdom first. Do what he wants you to do. Then all of those things will also be given to you.* ^{Mat.6:31} Another translation puts it this way: *What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.* TM

Third, Affirm our love for Jesus: Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." ^{Jn.21:16}

Fourth, Care for other Believers: Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ^{Jn.21:16}

Fifth, Affirm our love for Jesus: The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." ^{Jn.21:17}

Sixth, Care for other Believers: Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." ^{Jn.21:17}

As we follow these 6 steps of AFFIRMING OUR LOVE FOR JESUS and CARING FOR OTHERS we will stay happy (blessed) and cheerful and also be useful citizens in God's kingdom.

Try it – it really does work!

Sunday 29th April 2012. Psalm 50:1-6 John 13

The Full Extent Of Jesus Love

Last week we saw that **love is a commitment** not just an emotion. Peter's remorse was that he reneged on his commitment. He said that he loved Jesus but his words were empty – he didn't carry them through to into action. Peter fell asleep 3 times and denied knowing Jesus 3 times which is why 3 times Jesus asked Peter if he really loved him and then told him to do something about it – *Take care of my sheep.* ^{Jn.21:16}

At the Last Supper, Jesus *showed them the full extent of His love.* ^{Jn.13:1} After Jesus had washed their feet he said *Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do. I'm only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn't give orders to the employer. If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.* ^{Jn.13:12-17TM}

The world measures success by money and material possessions: *People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.* ^{1Sam.16:7} *The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight (What society sees and calls monumental, God sees through and calls monstrous.)* TM ^{Lk.16:14-15} However God measures success by faithfulness *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful (or reliable).* ^{1Cor.4:2} *Don't be greedy for what you don't have. Real life is not measured by how much we own.* ^{Lk.12:15^{NLT}}

God's values are often the opposite of this world's values and especially when it comes to who is important: *Jesus called them together. He said, "You know about the rulers of the nations. They hold power over their people. Their high officials order them around. Don't be like that. Instead, anyone who wants to be important among you must be your servant. And anyone who wants to be first must be your slave. "Be like the Son of Man. He did not come to be served. Instead, he came to serve others. He came to give his life as the price for setting many people free.* ^{Mat.20:25-28^(NIRV)} The Disciples were

accused of changing the *status quo* when they started living under God's rules: *For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.*^{Acts 6:14} *These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.*^{Acts 17:6(NKJV)}

Often God's values don't "make sense" to the "natural" person but God at His weakest is stronger than man at his strongest: *This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.*^{1Cor.1:25(NLT)} This is very helpful for us because when we make mistakes, God turns it for His glory and our good. *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.*^{Rom.8:28(NIV)}

Jesus Disciples are His students and we are learning to be like Him: *Students are not better than their teachers. But everyone who is completely trained will be like his teacher.*^{Lk.6:40(NIV)} *"A student is not better than his teacher. A servant is not better than his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher. And it is enough for the servant to be like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, what can the others who live there expect?" "So don't be afraid of your enemies.*^{Matt.10:24-26(NIV)}

Love is service with a good attitude: *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*^{Jn.15:12;17} *In your relationships with one another, have the same mind-set (attitude) as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!*^{Phil.2:5-8}

The ministry of helping others is as important as any other ministry gift: *You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it. First, God has appointed apostles in the church. Second, he has appointed prophets. Third, he has appointed teachers. Then he has appointed people who do miracles and those who have gifts of healing. He also appointed those able to help others, those able to direct things, and those who can speak in different kinds of languages they had not known before.*^{1Cor.12:27-28(NIV)}

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.^{Rom.12:3-13NLT}

What is the full extent of your love?

May: Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves; Psalm 68:19-20

Sunday 6th May 2012. Psalm 51

How Well Are You Dressed?

We usually wear clothes to **protect** us (from immodesty, cold, heat, rain and danger etc.) or **promote** something (such as our identity i.e. uniform or our values i.e. fashion).

Adam was created with a “garment of glory” – the (super)naturalness of God – but when he sinned Adam suddenly discovered that he had lost those clothes and was naked.^{Gen.3:7} God in His mercy (kindness and compassion) gave Adam and Eve some temporary clothes to wear. These were symbolic of the permanent (eternal) clothes that Jesus was to give us – His Righteousness. *May your priests be clothed with your righteousness; may your faithful people sing for joy.*^{Ps.132:9} “Take off his filthy clothes.” Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”^{Zech.3:4} For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.^{Is.61:10}

God’s “clothes” are glorious, beautiful, majestic and honourable: O LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendour and majesty.^{Ps.104:1} and our “spiritual clothes” are the same: *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*^{Gal.3:27} These “clothes” are the uniform that identifies us with Jesus. *Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.* (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.)^{Rev.19:8}

But we also have defensive clothes – Armour. *The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So don't live in darkness. Get rid of your evil deeds. Shed them like dirty clothes. Clothe yourselves with the armour of right living, as those who live in the light. We should be decent and true in everything we do, so that everyone can approve of our behaviour.*^{Rom.13:12-13(NLT)} *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.*^{1Thes.5:8} **This armour is to protect our spirit** (our God awareness) **and our soul** (our personality, which determines our emotion health) **from the world’s corrupt culture.** *The world is unprincipled. It's dog-eat-dog out there! The world doesn't fight fair. But we don't live or fight our battles that way—never have and never will. The tools of our trade aren't for marketing or manipulation, but they are for demolishing that entire massively corrupt culture. We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ. Our tools are ready at hand for clearing the ground of every obstruction and building lives of obedience into maturity.*^{2Cor.10:3-6(TIM)} *Put on all of God's armour so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil.*^{Eph.6:10(NLT)} Let’s use each part of this armour to ensure that we aren’t distracted or destroyed: *Use every piece of God's armour to resist the enemy in the time of evil, so that after the battle you will still be standing firm.*^{Eph.6:13(NLT)}

The Belt of Truth: *So stand firm. Put the belt of truth around your waist.* The belt holds everything together and also holds the sheath of our sword. We need to know the truth,^{Jn.8:32; 1Jn.2:20} speak the truth^{Eph.4:15} and walk in the truth.^{3Jn.1:4}

The Breastplate of Righteousness: *Put the armour of godliness on your chest.* The breastplate is our *right-wise-ness*, that is, the knowledge that we are right with God because of Jesus death and resurrection. This “wise-ness” (wisdom is applied knowledge) protects us, especially our heart (our personality and emotions), from everything that opposes God’s values – such as lies, ungodly ideas and non-God desires.

The Shoes of the Gospel: *For shoes, put on the readiness to preach the Good News of peace with God.* A firm footing and foundation is vital. This comes from our readiness to share our faith (what we believe about God). We must be steadfast and unmovable in our faith if we are to live a happy and effective life.

The Shield of Faith: *In every battle you will need faith as your shield to stop the fiery arrows aimed at you by Satan.* We use our shield (faith) to extinguish the “fiery darts” of the devils’ attacks on our mind. Note that we **extinguish** these “missiles” not deflect them!

The Helmet of Salvation: *Put on salvation as your helmet.* The helmet guards our minds and thought processes. Spiritual battles take place in our minds but we have been given a “saved mind” *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline (literally a “saved mind”). So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord* ^{2Tim.1:7}

The Sword of the Spirit: *And take the sword of the Holy Spirit. The sword is God's word. (Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon.)* The Sword is the Word of God which is sharp and effective so we must study and obey God's Word. *The word of God, which is at work in you who believe.* ^{1Thes.2:13}

Pray in Spirit: *At all times, pray by the power of the Spirit. Pray all kinds of prayers. Be watchful, so that you can pray. Always keep on praying for all of God's people. Pray also for me. Pray that when I open my mouth, the right words will be given to me. Then I can be bold as I tell the mystery of the good news.* Prayer is our communication with the Lord; His plans are always perfect, His support never fails.

So, how well are you dressed? If like Adam you discover that you have no clothes, then it is time to go the “Tailor” and get some! Maybe your clothes don't fit so well – then let Him alter them; if they are dirty – then let Him clean them! Our spiritual clothes, like the Israelites in the wilderness, will not wear out (*Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness. Their clothes did not wear out* ^{Neh.9:21}) or become out-dated so they can fit as comfortably, and look as good, as when we first wore them.

Sunday 13th May 2012. Psalm 52 John 14

What Friend We Have In Jesus.

We were created to be sociable and so friends are important: *And the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who will help him.”* ^{Gen.2:18(NLT)} Friends should be loyal ^{1Prov.17:17} but there are friends and friends! The “friend who sticks closer than a brother” ^{Prov.18:4} personifies Jesus who really does “love at all times”. ^{Prov.17:17} Jesus was like us - He was human, ^{Jn.1:14; Gal.4:4; Heb.2:14} He was tempted; ^{Lk.4:1-13; Heb.2:18;4:15} He got hungry, ^{Mk.11:12} thirsty ^{Jn.19:28} and tired. ^{Jn.4:6} Because Jesus was human He can sympathise with us, which makes Him a great Friend.

Yet Jesus was also very different from us – He pre-existed (He lived before He was born, ^{Jn.8:48} He was God ^{Jn.1:1} (He still is God and will always be God); He never sinned ^{2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.2:22} and He is of one essence with God the Father. ^{Jn.10:30} Jesus knew who He was and what His purpose was. He said “I came from the Father and entered the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” ^{Jn.16:28} It was this clear understanding of His purpose that gave Jesus direction and motivated Him to complete His work ^{Jn.4:34; 5:36} and obey His Father: *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!* ^{Phil.2:8} “Father, ...not my will, but yours be done.” ^{Lk.22:42}

Jesus not only obeyed His Father but He was an example for us too: *I have given you an example. You should do as I have done for you. (I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do.)* ^{Jn.13:15} *Christ suffered for you. He left you an example. He expects you to follow in his steps.* ^{1Pe.2:21} *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.* ^{1Cor.11:1} Jesus already knew how our minds, emotions, fears and joys affect us because He created us but because Jesus is now human, **we now KNOW that He understands us.** If Jesus could obey God (the Father), then with His help, we too can obey God.

Jesus spent a lot of time with His disciples whom He called “friends” *No one has greater love than the one who gives his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. ‘I do not call you servants anymore. Servants do not know their master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends. I have told you everything I learned from my Father.’*^{Jn.15:13-15} Jesus was preparing them for the time He would return to His Father so they would continue to teach about the Kingdom of God as well as live it. God’s Kingdom is a Kingdom of peace: *For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end.*^{Is.9:6-7(NLT)} The greeting of “**Peace**” is intended to dispel fear as well as show affection and goodwill: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*^{Jn.14:27(also vs.1)} **We don’t have to be afraid** because **Jesus can be trusted as much as God** (the Father) *Don’t be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me.*^{Jn.14:1}

We don’t have to be afraid of God: Because God is holy^{1Pet.1:16-17}, it is only natural to be afraid when we approach God, but in Jesus, God brings us peace: *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*^{Lk.2:10-11} However we should give God the respect and honour he deserves: *We are receiving a kingdom that can’t be shaken. So let us be thankful. Then we can worship God in a way that pleases him. We will worship him with deep respect and wonder. Our “God is like a fire that burns everything up.”*^{Heb.12:28-29(NIRV)}

We don’t have to be afraid of the devil: satan did his worst to Jesus and failed! Now satan is disarmed, defeated and destroyed. *(Jesus) took away the weapons of the powers and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross.*^{Col.2:15(NIRV)} *We know that those who have become part of God’s family do not make a practice of sinning, for God’s Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot get his hands on them.*^{1Jn.5:18(NLT)} *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*^{Jas.4:7}

We don’t have to be afraid of people: even strong people are weak compared to God. *The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed. ...The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.’*^{Ps.2:1-6} *God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*^{Heb.13:5-6} *If God is for us, who can be against us? ...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*^{Rom.8:310-37}

Jesus has not abandoned us – He has given us another Friend: *I will ask the Father. And he will give you another Friend to help you and to be with you forever. The Friend is the Spirit of truth.*^{Jn.15:16-17(NIRV)} The word “Friend” is **παράκλησις** (paraklesis) and means “a calling to one’s side” (para, “beside,” kaleo, “to call”); hence, either an exhortation, or consolation, comfort. The Holy Spirit (also called the Spirit of Jesus^{Acts 16:7; Phil.1:19}) will help us in the same way that Jesus helped the Disciples – He will be our Friend to encourage, comfort and counsel us. **If you are afraid then share your fears with Jesus who is a true Friend, Who really understands as well as cares for us.**

Sunday 20th May 2012. Psalm 54 John 15

How Near Are You To God?

As the RMS Titanic was sinking, the band played “*Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee*”. This has now become a very emotive hymn and joins the sentimental genre of other hymns like “*Just a closer walk with Thee*” and “*O for a closer walk with God*”. This aspiration to get nearer to God sounds spiritual and good, but as the proverb says “*good is the enemy of the best!*” So what does God’s Word say about becoming more spiritual? The basic facts of Christianity are: **God is Spirit,**^{Jn.4:24} **we are flesh** (human) and *humans can reproduce only human life.*^{Jn.3:6(NLT)} **God became flesh** (human)^{Jn.1:14} **which enabled us to become God’s children:** *But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.*^{Jn.1:12(NLT)} When we became Christians we were *born from above ...and of the Spirit.*^{Jn.3:3-7} We are now united with God *but anyone who is joined to the Lord becomes one with him in spirit,*^{1Cor.6:17(NLT)} *He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature.*^{2Pet.1:7}

Being spiritual is not the result of religious activity but the essence of our new nature given to us at conversion. Adam was God’s son^{Lk.3:38} but lost that position when he sinned and so all his descendants were also alienated from God: *For I was born a sinner - yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.*^{Ps.51:5(NLT)} *Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.*^{Rom.5:18-19(NLT)} We are righteous because righteousness is now our nature not because we are perfect. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21} *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*^{Phil.3:12(NLT)}

You cannot get more “spiritual” than having God make His home in you!^{Jn.14:23}

Maturity is not even about being “righteous,” “spiritual” or even having a “*spiritual experience*” for sadly history shows the opposite. Moses had face to face encounters with God yet refused to obey Him;^{Exodus 3} Gideon had a personal encounter with God yet did not believe Him;^{Judges 6} Solomon had a personal encounter with God^{1King 3} yet lived a profligate life, even though he came back to God before he died (Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as a reflection on his past life).

Maturity is about training ourselves to make the right choices: *Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right.*^{Heb.5:14(NLT)} *If we keep practising, what we practise becomes our second nature, then in a crisis and in the details of life we shall find that not only will the grace of God stand by us, but also our own nature. Whereas if we refuse to practise, it is not God's grace but our own nature that fails when the crisis comes, because we have not been practising in actual life.*^{Facing Reality by Oswald Chambers}

Grapes and Vines are often used in the Bible as an picture of God’s people: Joseph was a fruitful vine;^{Gen.49:22} the Israelites brought back a very large cluster of grapes from Eschol;^{Nu13:23} Israel is described a vineyard.^{Ps.80; Is.5; Matt.21:33 etc.} Wine is synonymous with the New Covenant.^{Joel 2:19f; Amos 9:13; Hag.1:11; Lk.5:37;22:17-20etc.} Grapes only grow on the vine’s new growth and so all last year’s branches are cut right back to the vine. In John 15, Jesus explained that we are like branches on a grape-vine and the Father is the Gardener who

wants us to produce fruit. All fruit has the DNA of the parent plant and the potential of similar life. Now we are God's children, **we too have the DNA of CHRIST and the potential to grow into mature CHRIST-ians.** **BUT** yester-year's (or yesterday's) fruit is no sign of maturity – only the fruit that we are bearing **TODAY** counts! The only way to bear fruit is for God to prune us and to remain in Jesus: *My Father is the gardener ... He trims every branch that does bear fruit. Then it will bear even more fruit ... Remain joined to me, and I will remain joined to you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain joined to the vine. In the same way, you can't bear fruit unless you remain joined to me.* ^{Jn.15:1-4(NIrV)}

Jesus went on to explain that to remain in Him means to remain in His love – not His doctrine or even the Church: *Just as the Father has loved me, I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love. In the same way, I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy will be in you. I also want your joy to be complete.* ^{Jn.15:9-11(NIrV)}

The greatest characteristic of Jesus is His LOVE. This ingredient is what distinguishes God's Kingdom from any other kingdom. *God is love* ^{1Jn.4:16} and because God created us in His image, ^{Gen.1:27} love is what everyone yearns for. Unfortunately people often mistake emotion for love and usually look for it in the wrong place. *Love comes from God ... But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love ... his is real love - not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins ... No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us ... God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect.* ^{1Jn.4:7-17(NLT)}

So don't try to be more "spiritual" or "get closer to God". **Rather, remain in His love and get into a habit of making the right choices.** *Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding.* ^{Heb.6:1} *The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity. And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest.* ^{Matt.8:14-15(NLT)}

Sunday 27th May 2012. Psalm 56 John 16

How Do You Respond To The Holy Spirit's Work In Your Life?

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to continue the work He started – which was to give us peace with God: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.* ^{2Pet.1:2} *Christ himself is our peace ... [Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far away. He also preached peace to those who were near. Through Christ we both come to the Father by the power of one Holy Spirit ... You are members of God's family ... You are being made into a house where God lives through his Spirit.* ^{Eph.2:14-22}

But before we can have peace with God, we must know that we are separated from God, and **that is the work of the Holy Spirit.** He shows us what sin really is, what being right with God really is and what being separated from God really is: *When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.* ^{Jn.16:8} The word "**convict**" is sometimes translated "**exposed**": *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ... But everything **exposed** by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible ... Be very careful, then, how you live.* ^{Eph.5:8-15} And this is what the Holy Spirit does – He exposes the darkness in our life so we can accept God's forgiveness. *If I don't leave, the Friend won't come. But if I go, I'll send him*

to you. When he comes, he'll expose the error of the godless world's view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He'll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted.^{Jn.16:7-11(TM)} [The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me. Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more. Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged.^(NLT)]

The Holy Spirit exposes sin. The essence of sin is unbelief: *everything that does not come from faith is sin.*^{Rom.14:23} And everyone is guilty of that! *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*^{Rom.3:23}

The Holy Spirit exposes righteousness (Jesus righteousness and our unrighteousness). *There is no one righteous, not even one;*^{Rom.3:10} *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21}

The Holy Spirit exposes judgment. *Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.*^{Jn.12:31-33}

Believers are those who have recognised Jesus as the Son of God and had His light expose their sin: *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God ... For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:4-6} *the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*^{Matt.4:16} *Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*^{1Jn.2:8}

But the Holy Spirit has a greater role for us Believers than just exposing errors.

The Holy Spirit lives in us: *Because you his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."*^{Gal.4:6} *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*^{2Cor.1:21-22} *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*^{1Cor.3:16}

The Holy Spirit fellowships with us: *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship (intimate friendship;TM sharing of life;^{NIV} harmony;^{BBE}) of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*^{2Cor.13:14} *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.2:1-5}

The Holy Spirit empowers us: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*^{Acts 1:8}

The Holy Spirit affects our health: *You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.*^{Rom.8:9-11} (note Paul writes "*mortal bodies*" **not** "*immortal bodies*")

The Holy Spirit wants us to belong totally to God: *Don't you know what Scripture says? The spirit that God caused to live in us wants us to belong only to God. Don't you think Scripture has a reason for saying that? God continues to give us more grace. That's why Scripture says, "God opposes those who are proud. But he gives grace to those who are not."*^{Jas.4:5-6(NIrV)}

The Holy Spirit teaches us about Jesus: *He will bring me glory by receiving something from me and showing it to you. Everything that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Holy Spirit will receive something from me and show it to you.*^{Jn.16:14-15(NIrV)}

So, how do you respond to the Holy Spirit's work in your life?

June: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **Philippians 4:6**

Sunday 3rd June 2012. Psalm 1

Message for the Diamond Jubilee Service

Today we are celebrating and commemorating Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee. The Queen has brought stability to our country by her consistency and also her counsel to 12 different Prime Ministers. At her Coronation the Queen was asked: *Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel?* to which she replied that she would. The Latin phrase *Fidei Defensor* is referred to on all current British coins by the abbreviations **F. D.** or **FID. DEF.** This title was granted to King Henry VIII in 1521 by Pope Leo X in recognition of Henry's book criticising Martin Luther's ideas which led to the Reformation! Although the Pope did not originally intend the title to encourage a personal faith, our Queen has consistently promoted her personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and especially in her Christmas broadcasts. Dr Billy Graham says that by having him preach on several occasions to the royal family at Windsor and Sandringham, she has gone out of her way to be quietly supportive of his mission. He believes one reason for the Queen's spiritual interest was the warm faith of her mother!

But there is another Monarch whose kingdom will last for much longer than 60 years – it will never end: *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king like his father David of long ago. He will rule forever over his people... His kingdom will never end.*^{Luke 1:32-33} This Kingdom will dominate every other kingdom, not in tyranny but in freedom, justice and liberty: *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever... The great God has shown you what will take place in days to come... And you can trust the meaning I have given you for it.*^{Daniel 2:44-45}

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."^{Jeremiah 23:5}

This Monarch is Jesus. He was born a King,^{Matt.1:2} had an ordinary upbringing until one day whilst he was being baptised the Holy Spirit descended on Him and equipped Him for an extra-ordinary ministry of healing and helping people: *This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*^{Acts 10:36-38} But the greatest part of His ministry was reconciling us to God: *For*

[Jesus] himself is our peace... His purpose was ...to reconcile [us] to God through the cross... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ^{Ephesians 2:14-18} After Jesus died things began to change even more. After 3 days He came back to life and 40 days later Jesus ascended physically to Heaven! As His friends were watching, an angel said “*why do you stand here looking at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. But he will come back in the same way you saw him go.*” ^{Acts 1:11} Ten days after that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to continue His work of reconciling people to God so they could be part of God’s Kingdom.

Jesus taught about this Kingdom: *God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.* ^{Matthew 5:3-11}

This Kingdom of Heaven is a parallel kingdom to the UK and so we can be in both kingdoms at the same time without any conflict (mostly!). We can be loyal to King Jesus as well as to our Queen. However if there is a conflict (i.e. if we are expected to support something immoral or blasphemous) then we must do as our conscience permits and take the consequences as the early Apostles did: *But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than any human authority... [Then] they called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go. The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: “Jesus is the Christ.”* ^{Acts 5:29-42}

Life in God’s Kingdom under Jesus rule is described as BLESSED because God blesses us. In Psalm 1 that we read together the **BLESSED** person is described as someone who doesn't make fun of God and his values, neither does he follow advice of bad people or make a habit of doing wrong. Instead, he takes delight and thinks a lot about God and His values. He is like a tree that is planted near a stream of water – always bearing fruit at the right time and everything they do turns out well! That is the kind of life I want to live. Not having to look over my shoulder to see if someone will accuse me or harm me. And because God’s Kingdom will eventually dominate the whole world I am already in the right place.

But the big question is: How do I get to be part of this Kingdom? *[Jesus] came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unending love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.* ^{John 1:10-14} “The word is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart.” That means the word we are preaching. You must put your faith in it. Say with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord.” Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. With your heart you believe and are made right with

God. With your mouth you say that Jesus is Lord. And so you are saved. Scripture says, "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." There is no difference between those who are Jews and those who are not. The same Lord is Lord of all. He richly blesses everyone who calls on him. Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ^{Roman10:8-13}

Why don't you do this right now? You'll find that these Bible verses will change your life - God always keeps His Word.

Sunday 10th June 2012. Psalm 57. John 16

How Not To Be Lonely When No One Is With You.

I am not alone, for my Father is with me. ^{Jn.16:32}

Jesus knew He would return to His Father in heaven after reaching the climax of His ministry i.e. His **vicarious** death. The word **vicarious** means **substitution** and is only the explanation of Jesus crucifixion: *He suffered the things we should have suffered. He took on himself the pain that should have been ours. But we thought God was punishing him. We thought God was wounding him and making him suffer. But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us.* ^{Is.53:4-5(NIV)} Jesus could have avoided this death by calling on His Father for help:

Do you think I can't ask my Father for help? He would send an army of more than 70,000 angels right away. But then how would the Scriptures come true? They say it must happen in this way. ^{Matt.26:53-54(NIV)}

But instead Jesus submitted to God's will – His plan and His purpose: *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him* ^{Heb.5:7-9} "Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." ^{Lk.22:42(NLT)}

When Jesus became human, He was able to overcome the power of death because He was not contaminated by sin: *Those children have bodies made out of flesh and blood. So Jesus became human like them in order to die for them. By doing that, he could destroy the one who rules over the kingdom of death. I'm talking about the devil. Jesus could set people free who were afraid of death. All their lives they were held as slaves by that fear... So he had to be made like his brothers in every way... And then he could pay for the sins of the people by dying for them.* ^{Heb.2:14-17(NIV)}

The proof that death, and its root cause sin, has been conquered is Jesus resurrection: *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* ^{1Cor.15:20-22} "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ. ^{1Cor.15:54-57(NLT)} *We believe in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. So God will accept our faith and make us right with himself. Jesus was handed over to die for our sins. He was raised to life in order to make us right with God.* ^{Rom.4:24-25(NIV)}

Jesus is called the **last Adam**, in contrast to the **first Adam** who brought sin and death to humanity: *The first man, Adam, became a living person. But the last Adam—that is, Christ—is a life-giving Spirit... Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven. Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man. Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man. What I am saying, dear brothers and sisters, is that our physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.*

These dying bodies cannot inherit what will last forever. But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.^{1Cor.15:45-53(NLT)}

Jesus is called the **2nd Man** because He has created a new breed of people – **the Redeemed**. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people... and enable[d] us to serve him without fear^{Lk.1:68-74} Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.^{2Cor.5:17-18(NIrV)}

This new breed of people (the new creation) are citizens of God's Kingdom (heaven) because they all have God as their Father. Although this is a spiritual kingdom it is none-the-less a very real kingdom with very real benefits. *You have been raised up with Christ. So think about things that are in heaven. That is where Christ is. He is sitting at God's right hand. Think about things that are in heaven. Don't think about things that are on earth.*^{Col.3:1-2(NIrV)} I have told you those things many times before. Now I say it again with tears in my eyes. Many people live like enemies of the cross of Christ. The only thing they have coming to them is death. Their stomach is their god. They brag about what they should be ashamed of. They think only about earthly things. But we are citizens of heaven. And we can hardly wait for a Saviour from there. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the power to bring everything under his control.^{Phil.3:18-21(NIrV)}

Because God is Spirit^{Jn.4:24} and His Kingdom a spiritual Kingdom, our relationship with God is also spiritual i.e. not limited by natural or physical boundaries. God is personally with us in a spiritual way that is just as real as any natural or physical person. Jesus had this relationship with His Father which is why He was able to say: *I am not alone, for my Father is with me.*^{Jn.16:32}

So how do we live in this spiritual yet real realm? By Faith! This simply means believing what God has said and then living on that basis. As we do that we find that God really is with us in more ways than we realise, especially when we need help – in fact He says: *For they are people blessed by the LORD, and their children, too, will be blessed. I will answer them before they even call to me. While they are still talking about their needs, I will go ahead and answer their prayers!*^{Is.65:23-24(NLT)}

We can never be alone when our heavenly Father takes such loving care of us!

Sunday 17th June 2012. Psalm 61. Guest Speaker: Dave Smethurst

Testimony Time

Make sure in your hearts that Christ is Lord. Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope you have. Be ready to give the reason for it. But do it gently and with respect.^{1Pet.3:15(NIrV)}

In a Christian context, our Testimony is a small part of our life story that we share to honour God and encourage others. I was given a church magazine recently in which someone had written their testimony entitled "A Healing Story" where they described how they were healed of a very painful and persistent stiff neck. As I read the article I could see more and more conflicts with our Christian Faith and I was left with the

impression that the person had no understanding of God as their Father, Jesus as their Saviour or the Holy Spirit as their Guide and Counsellor.

The value of our testimony is that it is our personal story about something that has happened to us. I do not doubt the validity of the person's relief from their painful stiff neck but there was no honour or glory given to God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that *Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever* which not only states the obvious but also agrees with Scripture: *You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honour God with your body.* ^{1Cor.6:19-20(NLT)} *Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.* ^{1Cor.10:31}

One of the obvious “warning bells” in the article was the reference to a person being a “healer”. Jesus said we should not revere anyone as a “Teacher” or as a “Father” because we are all equal: *Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don't let anyone call you 'Teacher,' for you have only one teacher, the Messiah.* ^{Matt.23:8-10(NLT)} Obviously Jesus did not mean we shouldn't recognise ministry gifting's and Paul acknowledged that he was an Apostle: *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.* ^{1Cor.1:1} But we never read of Paul calling himself (or being addressed as) “Apostle Paul” using “Apostle” as a title – his greeting was simply “Paul” and so also the other Apostles: *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.* ^{Jas.1:1} *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ;* ^{1Pet.1:1} *Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.* ^{Jude 1:1} Labels are helpful and Paul lists some of them in *Eph.4*; *1Cor.12*; *Rom.12*, but these are not titles to be used for status, to pull rank or show our importance.

We believe that God (Jehovah Rapha) is our Healer: *For I am the LORD, who heals you.* ^{Ex.15:26} **We believe** that God *sent forth his word and healed them.* ^{Ps.107:20} and that Word is Jesus Christ: *In the beginning, the Word was already there. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.* ^{Jn 1:1-14(NIrV)} **We believe** that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ^{Heb.13:8} and that *He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.* ^{Matt.8:17} Peter's explanation of healing is the same as we preach, teach, expect and experience: *By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.* ^{Acts 3:16}

A few years ago a national newspaper tried an experiment with prayer but the results were exactly the same as if no prayer had been done. George Canty in one of his ***I was Just Thinking*** articles (available on our church website under ***Who We Are/Sermon Outlines etc.***) commented: *Did they really think God would cooperate ... The only way prayer works is if God answers it, but He doesn't care for newspaper people testing Him to see if He does. It doesn't matter to God what we think about Him. You either believe or you don't. One time when God is put to the test is in healing meetings and in prayer. When people lose faith because God didn't do for them what seemed reasonable, they were testing God. In healing meetings, many come to try it out. If it doesn't happen, they either profess disappointment or are happy to 'prove' it doesn't work. The allegation is that the evangelist built up their hopes and then failed them. I don't believe this ever really happens. They had been testing God and God had not obliged.* ***True faith is never disappointed, healing or no healing.***

John wrote *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well (prosper).* ^{3Jn.1:3} So the way to enjoy good health is to ensure

our soul (our personality – the unique, individual us) prospers. However we are constantly experiencing situations (sometimes it is our own personality traits) that make this difficult. The Bible gives us the remedy, which is to praise God: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.* ^{Ps.42:5; Ps.43:5}

Our spirit is the spiritual part of us that is *born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, (an incorruptible seed) through the living and enduring word of God.* ^{1Pet.1:123} and when we make our spirit dominate our life, then our whole life prospers.

Jesus said “*Simon, Simon! Satan has asked to sift you disciples like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon. I have prayed that your faith will not fail. When you have turned back, (converted^{KJV}) help your brothers to be strong.*” ^{Lk.22:32NirV}

Let's continue to strengthen one another in the holy faith we have in Jesus Christ

Sunday 24th June 2012. Psalm 62. John 17

What Price Do You Put On A Life?

The most valuable thing in the world is **life** because you cannot put a price on it. Sadly for many people human life has lost any value with 189,931 abortions in England and Wales during 2011 (<http://transparency.dh.gov.uk/2012/05/29/abortion-statistics-2011>). This figure does not include the 6,151 abortions carried out on non-residents nor those in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The number of un-born babies killed in the UK since 1967 is greater than the number of people Hitler killed in the holocaust!

The disregard for human life is seen across the world: Stalin's regime 20-40 million people killed; Mao Ze-Dong's regime 50-80 million people killed; Rwanda in 1994 over 1 million people killed – and so the list continues. People have been kidnapping and killing since Cain killed his brother. ^{Gen.4:8} In ransom situations people are asked to pay what they can afford (or even more!) and if the person is released they consider the money worth paying. **But war, famine, disease or disaster does not increase death because death is total in every generation!** ^(quote from C.S.Lewis) *Everyone has to die once, then face the consequences.* ^{Heb.9:27(T.M.)} *No man can pay for the life of anyone else. No one can give God what that would cost. The price for a life is very high. No payment is ever enough. No one can pay enough to live forever and not rot in the grave.* ^{Ps.49:7-9(NirV)} Although the search for eternal life has dominated mankind, unfortunately the one Person who can provide the answer is usually excluded because mankind is in rebellion against God.

But Jesus has given us the answer in His prayer to His Father: Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ^{Jn.17:3}

Eternal Life is not the same as eternal youth or perfect physical health, for sickness and old age affect us all. *What man can live and not die? Who can escape the power of the grave?* ^{Ps.89:48(NirV)} *There's a proper time and way for people to do everything. That's true even though a man might be suffering greatly. No one knows what lies ahead. So who can tell a person what's going to happen? He can't stop the wind from blowing. And he doesn't have the power to decide when he will die.* ^{Ecc.8:6-8(NirV)} *Good people pass away; the godly often die before their time... No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come.* ^{Is.57:1(NLT)}

Eternal life is life with God and His Son Jesus, who is *Father of Eternity* ^{Is.9:6} **This eternal life does not begin at physical death but at spiritual rebirth:** *For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.* ^{1Pet.1:23(NLT)} God loved us (mankind) so much that He paid the

ransom for our life *God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:16} For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.^{1Tim.2:5-6} For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.^{Mk.10:45} God has never been beholden to Satan at any time and He has thrown him out of heaven^{Rev.12:13; Lk.10:18} and so this ransom was not paid to the devil as in a hostage situation. The word *ransom* conveys the idea of *exchange* or *substitution* i.e. that we can live because Jesus died. All mankind has been under Adam's curse^(Gen.3:19) because we inherited his sinful nature which is dead to God^(Gen.2:17; Eph.2:1) and decaying from the moment we are conceived. Although Jesus' mother was Mary, His Father is God: *But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.'*^{Lk.1:30-33} For God never said to any angel what he said to Jesus: "You are my Son. Today I have become your Father." God also said, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son." And when he brought his firstborn Son into the world, God said, "Let all of God's angels worship him."^{Heb.1:5-6(NLT)}

So although Jesus was human: *the Word became a human being*^{Jn.1:14(NIrV)} - He was not limited by human nature and so death could not control, enslave or imprison Him. *But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*^{Acts 2:24} *Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead. But look! I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys to Death and Hell.*^{Rev.1:17-18} Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he deliver those who have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.^{Heb.2:14-15(NLT)}

BUT this Eternal Life is not automatic – it is the result of Believing that Jesus is the Son of God: *I write this to you who believe in the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:13}

For us who do believe this eternal life has already started and my prayer is, that like Paul the Apostle, **we will be a good example to others:** *God showed me mercy so that Christ Jesus could show that he is very patient. I was an example for those who would come to believe in him. Then they would receive eternal life. The eternal King will never die. He can't be seen. He is the only God. Give him honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{1Tim.1:16-17(NLT)} Then Jesus spoke to his disciples. He said, "If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will find it. 'What good is it if someone gains the whole world but loses his soul? Or what can anyone trade for his soul? The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory. His angels will come with him. And he will reward everyone in keeping with what they have done.'^{Matt.16:24-27(NIrV)}

July: And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7

Sunday 1st July 2012 Psalm 63

What Race Are You Running?

The most important thing is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is

not to have conquered but to have fought well. ^{The Olympic Creed} The present Olympic Games started in 1859 and was held in Athens, with only athletes from Greece and the Ottoman Empire participating. The first Olympic Games under the auspices of the IOC took place in Athens in 1896 and the motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, meaning *Faster, Higher, Stronger* was introduced in 1924 at the Paris Games. The Olympic flag of five intertwined coloured rings representing the unity of the five inhabited continents of America, Africa, Asia, Australasia and Europe was flown for the first time at the 1920 Games in Belgium. The Olympic Games can be traced back to Olympia, Greece in 776 B.C. when athletes competed against each other to show their physical qualities through the performances as well as encouraging good relations between the cities of Greece. On the last day of the Games, the herald would announce the name of the Olympic winner, his father's name, and his homeland, and then a wreath (crown) made from olive branches was placed on the winner's head. These Games continued every 4 years until the end of the 4th Century A.D.

Paul the apostle uses these Games to draw a picture in our minds of our life – that we should have purpose and determination to gain a crown that will last: *In a race all the runners run. But only one gets the prize. You know that, don't you? So run in a way that will get you the prize. All who take part in the games train hard. They do it to get a crown that will not last. But we do it to get a crown that will last forever. So I do not run like someone who doesn't run toward the finish line. I do not fight like a boxer who hits nothing but air. No, I train my body and bring it under control. Then after I have preached to others, I myself will not break the rules and fail to win the prize.* ^{1Cor.9:24-27(NIrV)}

In a race we must keep to the rules so we are not disqualified. The same is true of our Christian life. Neither must we let others “cut in” on us to stop us finishing the race: *The only thing that really counts is faith that shows itself through love. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? The One who chooses you does not keep you from obeying the truth. You should know that “just a little yeast works its way through the whole batch of dough.” The Lord makes me certain that you will not think in any other way. The one who has gotten you all mixed up will pay the price. It doesn't matter who that may be.* ^{Gal.5:6-10(NIrV)}

How determined are you to finish your race? Paul was confident that he would finish and gain the winners “wreath” or crown: *But my life means nothing to me. I only want to finish the race. I want to complete the work the Lord Jesus has given me. He wants me to give witness to others about the good news of God's grace.* ^{Act.20:24 (NIrV)}

The race is our faith: *I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is a crown waiting for me. It is given to those who are right with God. The Lord, who judges fairly, will give it to me on the day he returns. He will not give it only to me. He will also give it to all those who are longing for him to return.* ^{2Tim.4:7-8(NIrV)}

We cannot please God without faith, but faith also expects results: *Without faith it isn't possible to please God. Those who come to God must believe that he exists. And they must believe that he rewards those who look to him.* ^{Heb.11:6(NIrV)}

One of the results of believing God is that He makes us right with Him: *God accepted Abraham's faith, and so his faith made him right with God... his faith had made him right with God... So Abraham is the father of all believers... God accepts their faith. So their faith makes them right with him.* ^{Rom.4:9-11(NIrV)}

Another result of faith is that we are not dominated by this world's system (because Jesus has already overcome it): *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I [Jesus] have overcome the world.* ^{Jn.16:33} *this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not*

burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.^{1Jn.5:3-5}

No athlete wants the disadvantage of extra weight or distractions and neither do we but there are times in our life when we need to endure hardship. By remembering Jesus and keeping our focus on Him, we will stay on course: *A huge cloud of witnesses is all around us. So let us throw off everything that stands in our way. Let us throw off any sin that holds on to us so tightly. Let us keep on running the race marked out for us. **Let us keep looking to Jesus.** He is the author of faith. He also makes it perfect. He paid no attention to the shame of the cross. **He suffered there because of the joy he was looking forward to.** Then he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. He put up with attacks from sinners. **So think about him. Then you won't get tired. You won't lose hope.***^{Heb.12:1-3(NIrV)}

The reward of life with God is worth the effort: *I have not yet received all of those things. I have not yet been made perfect. But I move on to take hold of what Christ Jesus took hold of me for. Brothers and sisters, I don't consider that I have taken hold of it yet. But here is the one thing I do. I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. I move on toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself. All of us who are grown up in the faith should see things that way.*^{Phil.3:12-15(NIrV)}

How well are you running your race? Keep going because it is worth it. *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.*^{Rom.8:18(NLT)} **Jesus finished His race; Paul the apostle finished his race and so can we.** *All these people were still living by faith when they died... they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*^{Heb.11:13-16}

Sunday 8th July 2012. Psalm 65. Acts 1

Never Read a Bible Verse

I read an article recently by Gregy Koukl entitled “**Never Read a Bible Verse**” (please ask if you want to read the article). The next sentence was: “**Instead, always read a paragraph at least**” and the article highlighted the problem of reading a small portion of Scripture and missing the author’s intended meaning. Originally there were no chapters and verses in the Bible. For convenience of reference, Jews had divided the OT into sections corresponding to our chapters and verses. During the time of King John and the Magna Carta, Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (who died in AD1228), made the chapter divisions we use today. The verses were introduced in the 1550’s by Robert Stephens and the first English Bible with chapters and verses was the Geneva Bible of 1560.

There is now no new revelation of God, nor from God because everything we need to know about Him is found in Jesus Christ. God is still speaking to us today, but what He says is not different from what He has already spoken through Jesus as recorded in the Scriptures. *Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son.*^{Heb.1:1-2} However, over the years some important truths have been neglected and the Church has re-discovered them. During the Reformation, **Justification by Faith** was re-discovered as was **Believer’s Baptism**. With Wesley and Whitfield in the 1700’s a **Personal Faith in a Personal Saviour** was re-discovered along with **Personal Holiness** and in the 1800’s the **Healing Power of the Gospel** was re-discovered. The **Pentecostal Power of the**

Gospel was re-discovered in the 1900's and 50 years later the **Power of Faith in God's Word** was re-discovered. **None of these were new truths – only re-discoveries of God's revealed truths already recorded in the Scriptures.** We must continually go back to the Scriptures for our information, doctrine and values and not rely on Church tradition. *And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men.*^{Acts 17:11-12}

Whilst the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are really helpful, they are not inspired by God and are sometimes in the wrong place (which is why newer translations start some paragraphs in the middle of a verse). When we look up Bible references we should read the verses either side to get the context and ensure we understand what is really meant. Jesus told His disciples to *wait for the gift my Father promised*^{Acts 1:4} but the context is *Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*^{Acts 1:4-5} They were waiting for Jesus to be glorified so He could send the Holy Spirit: *By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn.7:39} Today we are not expected to go to Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit - or even to wait – we are to ask and we will receive: *So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.*^{Lk.11:13} “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” he asked them. “No,” they replied... *When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them.*^{Acts 19:2-6}

The Holy Spirit has always been around - He was involved in the Creation process: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters,*^{Gen.1:1} but His role changed when Jesus returned to His Father – the Holy Spirit is not just with us (as He was under the old order) **but He now resides in us:** *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*^{Jn.14:16-17} **The Holy Spirit's role** is to **teach us and remind us of what God has said,**^{Jn.14:26} **to testify (confirm everything) about Jesus;**^{Jn.15:26} **to help;**^{Jn.16:7} **to prove and expose the error of the world;**^{Jn.16:8} **to guide into truth;**^{Jn.16:13} **to honour Jesus;**^{Jn.16:14} **to empower us to testify about Jesus;**^{Acts 1:8} **to distribute gifts.**^{1Cor.12:4}

Working and walking with the Holy Spirit is not a matter of thinking hard enough or “visualising” what we want – God does not play “mind-games with us. Walking with the Holy Spirit is yielding to Him – not putting any obstacles in His way: *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{Gal.5:25} The context of this verse is about living for God instead of an undisciplined life that dishonours God. This will only happen as we feed our spirit and soul on the true Food that God provides: *So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} Jesus answered, “It is written, ‘Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”^{Matt.4:4}

I'm going to keep on talking like God, feeding my body on His living Word.

Feeding my mind on what Jesus said, changing my weakness for His strength instead.

His Word is true, His Word is real, never depending on what I feel,

I'm going to say everything that He says, speaking to mountains while He does the rest.

I'm going to let it settle on me; all of it's truth is setting me free.
Becoming what God has made me to be, a joint heir with Jesus, I have liberty!

Let us continually work at knowing God's Word so we can live in His will

Be a good worker, one who doesn't need to be ashamed & who correctly explains the word of truth.^{2Tim.2:15}

Sunday 15th July 2012. Ps.66. Acts 1:12-2:14

The Holy Spirit Has Come!

Last week we saw that the role of the Holy Spirit has changed since the New Covenant was introduced. Previously the Holy Spirit was **with** people but now He resides **IN** us^{Jn.14:17} and He is called a **Deposit** ('pledge'; 'first instalment'; 'down-payment'; 'seal'): *When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance*^{Eph.1:13-14}

Although we say that Jesus "lives in us" (*Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you*^{2Cor.13:5}) – actually Jesus is in heaven with the Father: *But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*^{Acts7:56} *set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*^{Col.3:1} But because the God(head) is a unity, (*The LORD our God, the LORD is one*^{Deut.4:6}) when the Holy Spirit resides in us, we can say that Jesus is in us because He is Jesus' "deputy", "substitution" or "replacement": *For to us a child is born... and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor.*^{Is.9:6} *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth.*^{Jn.14:16-17}

What Jesus did for His Disciples in the Gospels, the Holy Spirit does for us today – He teaches us about God (especially Jesus), He encourages, counsels, comforts and convicts us as well as empowering us to speak about Jesus. This new role of the Holy Spirit began when Jesus was "glorified" i.e. when He returned to His Father: *Now I am going to him who sent me... But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*^{Jn.16:5-7} *By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn.7:39}

Although the historic event of Jesus' Disciples being baptised with the Holy Spirit is recorded in Acts 2 most people have not carefully read the story and miss the sequence of events:

1 *Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives... and went upstairs to the room where they were staying.*^{Act 1:12} This was probably the home of Mary (Mark's mother) ^{see Lk.22:12; Acts 12:12} (**about 12 people**).

2 *And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren.*^{Acts 1:15} Here they met to replace Judas (**about 120 people**).

3 *They were all together in one place.*^{Acts 2:1} This was 10 days after they met in the upstairs room. As was this Pentecost (one of the 3 essential Festivals^{Deut.16:16}) all devout Jews would have been at the Temple for the 9.00am morning Sacrifice so the venue would have been the Temple. Jesus had appeared to over 500 men at one time,^{1Cor.15:6} so there would have been **more than 1000 Believers** present as well as **over a 100,000 worshippers there**.

So what was so special about Pentecost?

Pentecost celebrated the giving of the Law

In the Old Covenant, 3000 people died at the giving of the Law: *They made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf... bowed down to it and sacrificed to it.....and that day about 3000 of the people died.*^{Ex.32:8-28}

In the New Covenant, 3000 people were saved at the giving of the Holy Spirit: *Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!" Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church—about 3000 in all.*^{Acts 2:40-41NLT}

In the Old Covenant, God wrote the law on stone: *The LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai. Then he gave him the two tablets of the covenant. They were made out of stone. The words on them were written by the finger of God.*^{Ex.31:18NirV}

In the New Covenant, God writes His law on our hearts (consciences): *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*^{Heb.8:10} *You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*^{2Cor.3:3-6}

In the Old Covenant, the Law was a Teacher to lead us to Christ: *What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. (It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins.^{NLT}) ...So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*^{Gal.3:19-25}

In the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit is a Teacher to lead us to Christ: *Jesus said: But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. ...He will bring me glory by receiving something from me and showing it to you. Everything that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Holy Spirit will receive something from me and show it to you.*^{Jn.16:13-15NirV}

Pentecost also celebrated the beginning of the harvest which continued until the Feast of Tabernacles (Ingathering): *Celebrate the Festival of Harvest (or Weeks) with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.*^{Ex.23:16}

The Christian Church began on the Day of Pentecost and the harvest of souls will continue until Jesus returns to take us to our permanent home. Pentecost (also called Feast of FirstFruits) came 50 days after Passover and 2 loaves (baked with yeast) were offered in the Temple: *Count off fifty days ...and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD... bring two loaves made ...of the finest flour, baked with yeast, as a wave offering of firstfruits to the LORD.*^{Lev.23:15} *Jesus has made one new group out of humanity, joining Jews and non-Jews through the Cross: Christ himself is our peace. He has made Jews and non-Jews into one group of people... He wanted to create one new group of people out of the two. He wanted to make peace between them. He planned to bring both of them as one body back to God because of the cross... Through Christ we both come to the Father by the power of one Holy Spirit.*^{Eph.2:14-18NirV}

As Pentecostals we celebrate the life and fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit and also the harvest of souls: *The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*^{Lk.10:2} *"You say, 'Four months more, and then it will be harvest time.' But I tell you, open your eyes! Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest right now. Those who gather the crop are already getting paid. They are already harvesting the crop for eternal life. So those who plant and those who gather can now be glad together. 'Here is a true saying. 'One plants and another gathers.' I sent you to gather what you have not worked for. Others*

have done the hard work. You have gathered the benefits of their work.” ^{also Jn.4:34-38NIrV}

Let us continually offer ourselves to God (like the loaves at the festival) to do His work.

Sunday 22nd July 2012. Ps.67 (Guest Speaker: Heather Angyal)

Can I be sure that all God’s Promises are for me?

The history of the human race includes the first man’s act of disobedience, which introduced sin and death through that sin. Forgiveness came through an act of obedience by another Man (and life through forgiveness): *When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned... Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ.* ^{Rom.5:12-15NLT}

All of Adam’s descendants inherited his “sinful nature” that was dead to God and separated from Him. This means that we are all born “sinners” even before we have done anything good or bad: *For I was born a sinner - yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.* ^{Ps.51:5NLT} *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.* ^{Eph.2:1;Col2:13}

Obviously a dead person cannot respond to anything, so everyone needs God’s grace to enable them to respond to the God and the Gospel message! **But after we respond to God’s Word, we can say with confidence that God has “chosen” us and so He will also keep us:** *For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.* ^{1Thes.1:4-5}

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. ^{Eph.1:11-13} *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* ^{Phil.1:6}

When we are “saved” (made alive in Christ and released from our sinful nature and sins), God’s promises are available to us: *For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding “Yes!” And through Christ, our “Amen” (which means “Yes”) ascends to God for his glory.* ^{2Cor.1:20NLT}

These promises include the Gift of the Holy Spirit: *Christ Jesus set us free so that... we might receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by believing in Christ.* ^{Gal.3:14NIrV} *All of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then your sins will be forgiven. You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children. It is also for all who are far away. It is for all whom the Lord our God will choose.* ^{Acts 2:38-39NIrV}

Christians who live without this Promised Gift will never reach their full potential and will become tired, weary and frustrated. It would be like driving a Rolls-Royce V-8 with only 2 cylinders working! Jesus said that anyone who is thirsty and believes in Him can receive the Holy Spirit: *“Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’ ”* (When he said “living water,” he was speaking of the Spirit) ^{Jn.7:38-39} *Come! Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.* ^{Rev.22:17}

At conversion the Holy Spirit comes into us. The Holy Spirit converts us and connects us to God: *no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.* ^{1Cor.12:3} *For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body* ^{1Cor.12:13} but there is a distinct experience separate from conversion, (although it can occur at the same time as conversion) which we call “the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” “receiving the Holy Spirit” or “being filled with the Holy

Spirit”: Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?^{Acts 19:2} But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women... When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.^{Acts 8:12-17}

When Jesus baptises (immerses or saturates) **us with the Holy Spirit** (He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire^{Lk.3:16}) **the Holy Spirit comes out of us** -through our personality and attitude as well as our mouth! Jesus said that the empowering of the Holy Spirit would enable us to be His witnesses: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*^{Acts 1:8} I believe that is the true evidence of Holy Spirit baptism, with tongues as an important consequence of the baptism and also a tangible sign. “Baptism” means “saturation” and those who are baptised in the Holy Spirit are immersed in Him and should display His character (which is the character of Jesus – who was *full grace and truth*^{Jn.1:14}). Jesus said this would be like: *a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.*^{Jn.4:14^{NLT}} *Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.*^{Jn.7:38^{NLT}}

Yes God’s Promises do change our life!

Contentment is part of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*^{1Tim.6:6} The greatest honour we can give to God is to trust Him and be content under His Lordship. We were created to worship God and to love Him *with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind.*^{Matt.22:37} As we worship, honour, respect and reverence God we have no desire to grumble, complain, moan or worry.

I know all God’s Promises are for me because: *the Father, has qualified me to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light*^{Col.1:12} **and the Holy Spirit is the deposit which guarantees those promises!**^{Eph.1:14}

Sunday 29th July 2012 Ps.69:30-36 (Guest Speaker: Dave Smethurst)

The Church! Who needs it? God does and so do we!!

**The Church’s one Foundation is Jesus Christ,
her Lord; she is His new creation by water and the word;
from heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride,
with His own blood He bought her & for her life He died.**

How many times have you heard people say “You don’t have to go to Church to be a Christian”?

Whilst this statement is true, those who use it to excuse themselves show how little they really understand about Christianity! Christianity is a lifestyle – something we do all the time – but at Church we have the opportunity to celebrate our faith in praise, prayer and presenting the Word of God, with more people than our individual family at home. Church becomes our extended family where we care for one another and encourage each other to keep the faith (i.e. to trust God).

So what is Church? The word **Church** is from the Greek **ἐκκλησία** (**Eklesia**) which is defined as: **a gathering of citizens¹, called out from their homes², into some public place³, for the purpose of deliberating⁴** (i.e. discussing with action taken after careful consideration). These 4 points are helpful for us to understand what Church really is.

1 Church consists of people who are citizens of heaven. This has nothing to do with our natural or first birth but solely to do with our second birth from above: *But our citizenship is in heaven.*^{Phil.3:20} *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.*^{Eph.2:19}

2 Church consists of people who have responded to God's call and are doing something about it. When we come together to worship God we leave our home behind i.e. our thoughts of lunch, business, family, friends, leisure etc. and focus our minds on God: *Of all the commandments, which is the most important? Jesus answered "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*^{Mark 12:28-31}

3 Church meets in public not in private. We are not a secret society or cult. We are transparent and accountable. *We can say with confidence and a clear conscience that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings. We have depended on God's grace, not on our own human wisdom. That is how we have conducted ourselves before the world, and especially toward you. Our letters have been straightforward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can't understand.*^{2Cor.1:12-13NLT} *Unlike many people, we aren't selling God's word to make money. In fact, it is just the opposite. Because of Christ we speak honestly before God. We speak like people God has sent.*^{2Cor.2:17NLT}

4 Church meetings are deliberate (i.e. our Church activities have a purpose) **and we intend to take action after hearing the facts.** We are Church when we come together in public to make quality decisions to change after spending time with God and His people. *The Bereans were very glad to receive Paul's message. They studied the Scriptures carefully every day. They wanted to see if what Paul said was true. So they were more noble than the Thessalonians.*^{Acts 17:11NLT} *Jesus replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."*^{Lk.8:21} *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*^{Matt.7:24} *But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves... and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*^{Jas.1:22-25NLT}

What does the Bible says about Church?

The Church is built by Jesus upon the revelation that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Revelation is heart knowledge not just head knowledge.) *"You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it."*^{Matt.16:16-18NLT}

The Church is the body of Jesus: *Jesus is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*^{Col.1:18}

The Church belongs to Jesus: *Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead.*^{Rev.1:5} *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.*^{Heb.12:22-23}

The Church is loved by Jesus: *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*^{Eph.5:23-30}

The Church should display Jesus' wisdom. Church should be the easiest place to get a miracle because God intends to show His wisdom there: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*^{Eph.3:10}

The Bible does not say that we must all go to Church but that we should continue to meet together: *Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, (let us cheer each other up with words of hope^{NirV})^{Heb.10:25NLT}* Some of our elderly Church Members are unable to get to Church any more. **Make your faith practical by encouraging them and cheering them up with words of hope** – you could visit them or send a card. To help us remember these folk, and also visitors who have encouraged us, we have placed their names and photos on a Prayer Board. When you look at the Board, remember them with thanksgiving in your prayers. *Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. I always pray for you, and I make my requests with a heart full of joy because you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.*^{Phil.1:3-5NLT} *With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*^{2Thes.1:11-12}

August: Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” Psalm 91:1-2

Sunday 5th August 10.30am: Ps.110 Acts 2

Something has happened!

Picture the birthday of the Church. Jesus had helped people for 3½ years by teaching and healing them, which provided ample evidence that He was the Christ: *You know the message God sent ...announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know ...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did... They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*^{Acts 10:36-43}

Even with this clear evidence, many of Jesus countrymen did not believe but those who did believe became God’s children: *He came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God. To be a child of God has nothing to do with human parents. Children of God are not born because of human choice or because a husband wants them to be born. They are born because of what God does.*^{Jn.1:11-13NirV}

How sad that some people can even oppose the facts presented to them because of their own bigotry! A bigot is someone who is so entrenched in their own views or opinions that they will not carefully consider the evidence. We saw last week that part of the definition of Church is that **we intend to take action after hearing the facts** - we come together to make quality decisions to change after spending time with God and His people. Sometimes this means confronting our traditions and re-evaluating them from an un-biased reading of Scripture. Norah Lam in her book **“China Cry”** tells a

story from her childhood when her grandfather advised her: *Don't believe everything you're told. Always think for yourself. After all, I didn't get to be chairman by letting others think for me.*

The ministry of the Church is to help us mature so we can stand firm in our faith (be at peace with God and ourselves in every situation): *The responsibility [of the Ministry gifts Christ gave to the Church] is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*^{Eph.4:11-16NLT}

Jesus healed lot of people but those He commended were those who **believed for themselves:** *Dear woman, your faith has healed you. Go in peace. You are free from your suffering.*^{Mk.5:34NIrV} Our faith causes us to overcome our difficulties: *For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:4-5NLT} *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} **But we must supplement our faith with right actions.**

Wrong actions show that we have forgotten that God has forgiven our past sins: *make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence... and knowledge... and self-control... and patient endurance ...and godliness ...and brotherly affection ...and love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop in this way are short-sighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins.*^{2Pet.1:5-9NLT}

There is great value in talking over our concerns but let's make sure **we never complain about God or accuse Him of doing wrong.** *After Job heard all of those reports, he ...worshiped the LORD. He said, "I was born naked. And I'll leave here naked. You have given, and you have taken away. May your name be praised." In spite of everything, Job didn't sin by blaming God for doing anything wrong.*^{Job.1:20-22NIrV}

Some situations we face are desperately unfair and cruel but when we see it from God's perspective it makes sense. David was so relieved that he didn't talk like the unbelievers that he watched "succeed": *Here is what sinful people are like. They don't have a care in the world. They keep getting richer and richer. It seems as if I have kept my heart pure without any reason. It didn't do me any good to wash my hands to show that I wasn't guilty of doing anything wrong. Day after day I've been in pain. God has punished me every morning. What if I had said, "I will speak as evil people do"? Then I wouldn't have been faithful to God's children. I tried to understand it all. But it was more than I could handle. It troubled me until I entered God's temple. Then I understood what will happen to bad people in the end.*^{Ps.73:12-17NIrV}

When God sent the Holy Spirit to birth the Church, He also equipped us to live as sons of God by enabling us to put God's Word into practice: *But then the right time came. God sent his Son... He came to set free those who were under the law. He wanted us to be adopted as children with all the rights children have. Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. He is the Holy Spirit. By his power we call God "Abba." Abba means Father. So you aren't slaves any longer. You are God's children. Because you are his children, he gives you what he promised to give his people.*^{Gal.4:4-7NIrV} *blessed are those who hear God's word and obey it.*^{Lk.11:28NIrV}

We are different from the world so let's continue to live differently because we've seen the evidence and decided to change: *Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer plunge into the flood of wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you. But remember that they will have to face God, who will judge everyone, both the living and the dead. That is why the Good News was preached to those who are now dead—so although they were destined to die like all people, they now live forever with God in the Spirit.*^{1Pet.4:4-6NLT} Yes something has happened – we have saved ourselves from this corrupt generation: we have repented, been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and received the gift of the Holy Spirit.^{Acts 2:38-40}
Yes, we are ready and willing!^{Ps.110:3}

Sunday 12th August 2012 Ps.37:1-11 Acts 3

Are you Bible Literate?

Faith or Fate? Fate says: what will be – will be. Faith says: God's Will – will be!

Our difficulty is knowing what God's will is! Too often we take the lazy route and suffix our "prayers" with "if it be Your will" because we haven't taken the time or effort to know what God's will is! Other times we insist something is God's will when it is not. **Our Church's aim is to help us all to become Bible Literate** (i.e. have a good understanding and working knowledge of the Bible) and so be like the men of Issachar, *who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.*^{1Chrn.12:32} To know the right thing and then do it, even if it is difficult, is the hallmark of a wise person: *the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a person may be weighed down by misery. (even when a person is in trouble.*^{NLT}^{Ecc.8:5-6})

Although the Bible is historically true, it is not intended to be a history book, a science book, or a poetry book – **its purpose is to testify of Jesus and to reveal to us God's plan of redemption.** It is a book through which God speaks to our hearts and by which we must be moved. It is the word of the Lover to his beloved which captivates our hearts and will not let us go.

Paul encouraged Timothy to "prove" himself as a good Bible teacher who "correctly handled" the Scriptures (i.e. taught them accurately - *giving the true word in the right way*^{BBE}): *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} **To do this we must understand the difference between the OT & the NT and between what God has done for us & what He has yet to do.** When we understand the purpose of the Bible, it becomes a fascinating and relevant book which gives us an amazing insight into God and His Kingdom. The Bible really does become: *a lamp for my feet, a light on my path,*^{Ps.119:105} *health to one's whole body,*^{Pron.4:22} *and the bread of life,*^{Jn.6:35;Matt.4:4} and the difficult parts no longer trouble us: *God made [Paul] wise to write as he did. He writes the same way in all his letters. He speaks about what I have just told you. His letters include some things that are hard to understand. People who don't know better and aren't firm in the faith twist what he says. They twist the other Scriptures too. So they will be destroyed. Dear friends, you already know that. So be on your guard. Then you won't be led down the wrong path by the mistakes of people who don't obey the law. You won't fall from your safe position.*^{2Pet.3:15-17NIV}

Our goal is to ensure that we are all able to know God's will and so pray with confidence: *Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded*

us.^{1Jn.3:21-23} *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*^{1Jn.5:13-14} However there are many times (especially when it comes to guidance) that after prayer, we must accept the outcome (whatever it is) as God’s will for us. This is not fatalism but rather a total confidence in a loving heavenly Father caring for His child – a complete trust in God that is based on His character and our knowledge of Him. When we commit our ways to the Lord, we expect and accept that He directs our ways: *Trust in the LORD and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit everything you do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help you... Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for him to act. Don't worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes. Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper— it only leads to harm.*^{Ps.37:3-8NLT}

In the NT we do not read of people praying for hours or days for what to do because they already been given direction: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*^{Mk.16:15}

Peter got further direction when he was thinking about a vision: *While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "...Do not hesitate to go with them"*^{Acts10:19}

Paul followed his own ideas: *Some time later Paul said... "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ...Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*^{Acts15:36-41} It was whilst he was travelling that Paul got clearer directions: *Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*^{Acts 16:6-10} *But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but satan blocked our way.*^{1Thes.2:17-18} N.B.

the “satan” who blocked Paul’s way was not some ethereal spirit but the Jews: *But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.*^{Acts 17:13-15}

By having this working knowledge of the Bible we can put our energy into doing what God has already told us to do instead of trying to find out what He wants. Our prayers will take on a different perspective – instead of having a “shopping list” prayer time we will use our prayers to *discuss with the Father His plans and how we are to be involved; it becomes a time to express our confidence in Him and our gratitude for the high honour of being a partner with Him. Prayer becomes: communion with the Father; pondering what His Word says about our ideas and conforming our concepts to His; thanking God for His gifts and callings in our lives, and listening for His directions in how and where to use those gifts for the good of our hurting world. (See T.LOsborn’s “The Winning Secret” available from the Church or our website)*

Our activities at Church are deliberate, intentional and purposeful so we can *prepare God's people to serve... That will continue until we all become one in the faith and in the*

knowledge of God's Son. Then we will be grown up in the faith. We will receive everything that Christ has for us.^{Eph.4:12-13NIV}

On a scale of 1-10, how would you score in Bible Literacy?

How to improve your Bible Literacy

Grow in wisdom – like Jesus did: *Jesus became wiser and stronger. He also became more and more pleasing to God and to people.*^{Lk.2:52}

Wisdom is applied knowledge – putting God's word into practice: *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man.*^{Matt.7:24}

Don't just listen to the word. You fool yourselves if you do that. You must do what it says. Suppose you listen to the word but don't do what it says. Then you are like a man who looks at his face in a mirror. After looking at himself, he leaves. Right away he forgets what he looks like. But suppose you take a good look at the perfect law that gives freedom. You keep looking at it. You don't forget what you've heard, but you do what the law says. Then you will be blessed in what you do. Suppose you think your beliefs are right because of how you live. But you don't control what you say. Then you are fooling yourselves. Your beliefs are not worth anything at all. Here are the kinds of beliefs that God our Father accepts as pure and without fault. When widows and children who have no parents are in trouble, take care of them. And keep yourselves from being polluted by the world.^{Jas.1:22-27NIV}

Eight ways to improve your Bible Literacy

- 1. See the bigger picture of Scripture** i.e. know about the books of the Bible, where they are and what they are about, especially the NT. Remember the Bible is not a legal rule book but a love story about God and you and is written primarily for those who believe.^{1Jn.5:13}
- 2. See the purpose of Scripture (God's plan of redemption as revealed in Jesus) throughout the entire Bible.**^{Jn.5:13; 20:31}
- 3. Cultivate an awareness of God's Presence.** *They will call him Emmanuel which means 'God is with us.'*^{Matt.1:23} Affirm His love for you and your love for Him: *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*^{S.ofS.6:3} remembering and reminding yourself of what God has said^{2Pet.1:12-13; 3:1-2; Josh.1:8} knowing that all God's promises are yours in Jesus: *God has made a great many promises. They are all "Yes" because of what Christ has done. So through Christ we say "Amen." We want God to receive glory.*^{2Cor.1:20NIV}
- 4. Consciously commit your ways to God throughout the day.** *Commit everything you do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help you.*^{Ps.37:5NLT}
- 5. Consciously cast your cares onto God throughout the day:** *Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.*^{1Pet.5:7NLT}
- 6. Learn to follow God's promptings.** God has written His laws on your heart: *I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.*^{Heb.8:10} It is the willing and obedient who enjoy God's blessings: *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.*^{Is.1:19}
- 7. Discuss and share what you believe.** *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*^{Phil.1:6} *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.*^{Pron.15:22}
- 8. Learn from others.** *Brothers and sisters, I have used myself and Apollos as examples to help you. You can learn from us the meaning of...*^{1Cor.4:6NIV} Fellowship is sharing - giving and receiving: *Yet it was good of you to share... with me in the matter of giving and receiving.*^{Phil.4:14-15} We should teach and be teachable: *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*^{2Tim.2:2}

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had... Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do

what pleases him. ^{Phil.2:5;12-13NLT} *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing.* ^{Phil.4:8-9 NLT} *Then the God of peace will be with you.*

Sunday 19th August 2012. Ps.70 Acts 4

How do you respond when people oppose what you say about Jesus?

The early Church preached a very simple message: there is more to life than the here and now – there is a resurrection from the dead. ^{Acts4:2} The Middle East was full of Greek mythology with its fantastic stories so the idea of a resurrection did not upset anyone – **until... they said the resurrection was only in Jesus** ^{Acts4:2} **and that there is no salvation in any other name!** ^{Acts4:12} The Disciples' proof of the resurrection from the dead was Jesus' resurrection which they testified to, and also their acts of kindness. ^{Acts4:9}

The first ever sin was when satan opposed God: *I will make myself like the Most High,* ^{Is.14:14} and satan continues to oppose God. The word “satan” means “oppose”. In some passages in the Bible the word “*satan*” is used as a verb: *the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him* ^{Nu.22:22} (the word **oppose** in Hebrew is **satan**). Jesus addressed Peter as “satan” when he opposed Him: *Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are standing in my way. You do not have in mind the things of God. Instead, you are thinking about human things.”* ^{Mat.16:23NirV} Jesus said: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so they can have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way.* ^{Jn.10:10NirV} The devil opposed Jesus and tried all he could to destroy God's plans but God used satan's evil plans to destroy him: *[Jesus] took away the weapons of the powers and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross.* ^{Col.2:15NirV} *None of the rulers of this world understood God's wisdom. If they had, they would not have nailed the Lord of glory to the cross.* ^{1Cor.1:8NirV} Jesus saw satan fall like lightning from heaven ^{Lk.10:18} and satan lost [his] place in heaven. *The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him... For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.* ^{Rev.12:8-10}

Now satan has no power over the Believer: *We know that God's children do not make a practice of sinning, for God's Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot touch them.* ^{1Jn.5:18NLT} *You will be able to destroy all the power of the enemy. Nothing will harm you.* ^{Lk.10:19NirV} **But satan still has the ability to deceive us** (trick us into believing a lie) **if we don't stay in fellowship with God & other Believers or keep our minds renewed:** *Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.* ^{Rom.12:2NLT} *Let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.* ^{Eph.4:23-24NLT}

When we present the Truth about God, satan opposes us with all his devilish and devious schemes. Often the most intense opposition comes from religious leaders. Religion, without a true relationship with God, causes a passionate and powerful reaction against God and His family. There is a real spirit world that interacts with the natural world and any foothold the devil can get, will be used as a launching pad to attack Believers. In Acts 4, it was the leaders of the Jewish religion who really hated hearing about the resurrection and who persecuted the Believers. Jesus called them “*blind guides*” who

can't see, won't see, shan't see and won't let others see either! *The Pharisees are blind guides. If a blind person leads another who is blind, both of them will fall into a pit.*^{Mat.15:14} *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides! ... You blind fools!*^{Mat.23:14-17}

We don't have to be an academic to understand or see the Truth. *At that time Jesus was full of joy through the Holy Spirit. He said, 'I praise you, Father. You are Lord of heaven and earth. You have hidden these things from the wise and educated. But you have shown them to little children. Yes, Father. This is what you wanted.*^{Lk.10:21NIrV} Peter & John were fishermen – manual workers, not university graduates - **but they had had their eyes opened by Jesus:** *The leaders saw how bold Peter and John were. They also realized that Peter and John were ordinary men with no training. This surprised the leaders. They realized that these men had been with Jesus.*^{Acts 4:13NIrV} *But their minds were closed, and even today that same covering hides the meaning when they read the old agreement. That covering is taken away only through Christ. Even today, when they read the law of Moses, there is a covering over their minds. But when a person changes and follows the Lord, that covering is taken away.*^{2Cor.3:14-16NCV} *Then their eyes were opened and they recognized [Jesus], and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'*^{Lk.24:31-32} *Then Jesus told him, 'I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.'*^{Jn.9:39NLT}

God always responds to faith (however small), so we can never make the excuse of not having "enough" faith: *The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' He replied, 'If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.'*^{Lk.17:5-6}

However we must cultivate our faith –

by removing obstacles: *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*^{2Cor.10:5}

by staying pure (clean): *cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,*^{Eph.5:26}

by building up our faith: *use your most holy faith to build yourselves up, praying in the Holy Spirit.*^{Jude1:20NCV}

by confessing the truth: *With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.*^{2Cor.4:13-14}

This story in Acts 4 ends with the Believers coming together to pray – not against the evil people but to thank God and to ask Him for boldness to speak more effectively: *Now, Lord, consider the bad things they say they are going to do. Help us to be very bold when we speak your word. Stretch out your hand to heal. Do miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.*^{Acts 4:30NIrV}

How do you respond when people oppose what you say about Jesus?

If you do the same as these Believers did, you will get the same results as they did! *After they prayed... they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were bold when they spoke God's word.*^{Acts 4:31NIrV}

Sunday 26th August 2012 Ps.71:14-24 Acts 5

Keeping up with the Joneses!

Keeping up with the Joneses is an English idiom which refers to the comparison to one's neighbour as a benchmark for social standing. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look pious at Church and so pretended to give more money than they actually did. Christianity is heart religion where motive is more important than method. God sees and notes our heart: *for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.*^{1Sam.2:3} *The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*^{1Sam.16:7} *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*^{Ps.139:23-34^{NLT}} If we put more value on something than we should, even in our mind, it is idolatry and offensive to God. Actually more idols are mental than metal! God is the only One who deserves our worship and we should be careful that our natural and good desires do not control us and take God's place in our life. Idolatry is actually very dangerous: *God hates those who cling to worthless idols*^{Ps.31:6} *and those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*^{Jonah 2:8} *Those who worship idols are put to shame*^{Ps.97:7} *and those who make them become like them*^{Ps.115:4f; Ps.135:15} *Metal idols are not actually deities for even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this.*^{1Cor.8:5-7}

A few weeks ago we saw that there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, even when a person is in trouble.^{Ecc.8:5-6} Jesus said *we must do everything that is right.*^{Matt.3:15^{NLT}} We should all strive (put in some effort) to live a holy life, being generous and caring for others but we are real people, living a real life in a real world! We are not actors in a play or film studio where learn our script and can re-take a scene if we mess it up. There is no "Ground-Hog day" where we can continually re-live yesterday until we get it right! Interestingly in Greek (the language of the NT) the word "actor" is also "hypocrite" – **someone who pretends to be someone else!** Jesus denounced the religious leaders as "children of hell" and "hypocrites" – people who pretended to be something they were not: *Woe to you, (what sorrow awaits you*^{NLT} *a curse is on you*^{BBE} *how terrible it will be for you*^{NirV}) *teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!*^{Matt.23:13} *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! (you pretenders!) You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. (On the outside you seem to be doing what is right. But on the inside you are full of what is wrong. You pretend to be what you are not.*^{NirV} *Matt.23:27-28*

Religious hypocrisy is deadly – literally so for Ananias and Sapphira! When they lied to God, they dropped dead – presumably they both had a heart attack - their bodies couldn't take the shock! There is no record of Peter "cursing" them or even pronouncing judgement on them. All he did was to sternly ask them if they were telling the truth and then questioned why they would lie to God. *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."*^{Heb.12:28-29}

Jesus did not come to condemn and so neither should we: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not*

condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.^{Jn.3:17-18} **BUT we should be able to discern what is right and what is wrong:** *The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about (can evaluate^{NLT}) all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.^{1Cor.2:14-16} Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.^{Heb.5:14NLT}*

If we live a double-standard life we are no better than the hypocrites Jesus denounced.

Paul had strong words to say about double-standards: *Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?^{Rom.1:32-2:4}*

"Success" is not about being like others and we should never be intimidated by someone else's status, wealth or even their generosity: *though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.^{Ps.62:10} Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.^{Lk.12:15}*

Our worldly assets are only temporary and can be removed in an instant – like Job's! But faith is trusting God whatever our circumstances. But faith is actually much more than "just" trusting God – **faith is also knowing that God will reward us:** *Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.^{Heb.11:6}*

Doing the right thing will sometimes get us into trouble (^{see Acts 5:17}) but because we can see the bigger picture (i.e. that God is in charge and will reward us) it is always worth persevering: *Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.^{Gal.6:7-10NLT}*

No-one can make you feel inferior without your permission! Instead of wanting what others have let's affirm what we already do have: A holy spirit; a redeemed soul; a Holy Spirit inhabited body; a loving heavenly Father; a precious Saviour; an empowering Holy Spirit; a forgiven past; a blessed present; a glorious future....

You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.^{Phil.2:5NIrV} Let us keep looking to Jesus. He is the author of faith. He also makes it perfect... So think about him. Then you won't get tired. You won't lose hope.^{Heb.12:2-3NIrV}

Instead of "keeping up with the Joneses" let's keep up with Jesus!

September: Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Romans 12:12

Sunday 2nd September 2012 Ps.72

Back to School

Our Childhood is the most important time of our life because what we do then, determines our future. Influences in childhood mould our character and affect the rest of our life. Learning is a lifelong experience but if we don't make a conscious effort to learn, we will learn subconsciously, which will be haphazard, chaotic and usually detrimental to our spiritual and emotional welfare. Most of what we learnt at school was not of itself very important; but it was the discipline, the values and concepts, as well as the ability to learn, that was valuable. These skills enabled us to learn greater things which are useful and also enable us to cope with problems we have never faced before.

There is not much about schools in the Bible but Paul actually taught in a school at Ephesus: *But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*^{Acts 19:9-10} Paul explains that the Law (OT) was *our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.*^{Gal.3:24-25KJV} But we have graduated from the OT to the NT, where the Holy Spirit is now our "Schoolmaster" who brings us to Christ: *but the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*^{Jn.14:26}

Our Church is a school and we offer training to equip each of us for life- expected and unexpected events! A habit is something that is done without thinking and here at Church our activities are intended to develop good spiritual habits in all of us so we can automatically do the right thing, at the right time, in a way that honours God.

Most schools have a uniform and badge that identifies the pupils with that school and sets a standard of smartness and a sense of equality. The Church has a spiritual "uniform" that identifies us with God and sets a standard of smartness and also gives us a sense of equality with each other. Our "**uniform**" is **JESUS RIGHTEOUSNESS**, i.e. His **rightness before God**, which He **GIVES** to us. This uniform is seen in our attitude and our appreciation of God. Our "**spiritual badge**" is our **FAITH** which is seen by our behaviour and conversation.

How visible is your Uniform?

But Church is much more than an educational establishment. Our Services are called **WORSHIP SERVICES** because they are just that – **a time where we can worship God together, in one place, with one Spirit and in one mind**. Our worship Services are a time when we can express the Worth-ship of God – what He is worth to us. Obviously those of us who have been forgiven much will love much!^{Lk.7:36-50} (Actually we have been forgiven **EVERYTHING!**) We honour God by saying good things about Him and especially about Jesus; we say true things about Him in ways that convey our deep-felt convictions and heart-felt emotions. That is why we leave time for people to interject with their own personal appreciation of God and it is a great blessing to share in one another's joys and sorrows for we really are one Body. We do need to know who we are in Christ Jesus but worship can only be God-focused and so our songs are chosen to direct our attention to God and His honour rather than to us and our problems - or even our aspirations. God is worthy of praise,^{Ps.18:3;145:3;2Sam.22:4;1Chron.16:25} creates praise^{Is.57:19} and has ordained praise.^{Ps.8:2} God is our praise^{Deut.10:21} and the theme of our praise.^{Ps.22:25}

We are created to praise Him.^{Is.43:18} Praise is glorious,^{Ps.66:2} good^{Ps.92:1} and honours God.^{Ps.50:23} Praise is for everyone,^{Ps.103:21;117:1} for everywhere^{Ps.113:3} and forever.^{Ps.52:9;71:6;79:13;89:52;Rom.1:25;9:5} Praise is audible,^{Ps.66:8;Jer.31:7;} loud^{Ps.26:7;Luke 17:15;19:37} and should always on our lips.^{Heb.13:15;Ps.34:1;51:15;63:5;} Praise can be spoken,^{Lk.2:28} sung^{Ps.7:17;9:2;1Chron.16:9;Neb.12:46;Job.36:24} in our own language^{1Cor.14:14-17} and in tongues;^{Acts10:46} with music^{Ps.4:4;33:2;40:3;71:22;150:3} or with dancing.^{Ps.149:3;150:4} Praise awaits God in Zion (we look forward to praising God^{NIV}; is due to God^{ESV}).^{Ps.65:1}

Praise is always active and demonstrative and the OT Hebrew language has more than 37 different words and derivatives for **PRAISE** (our English language has about 8!). To understand the meanings of these words for **Praise** will help us to be more confident in our worship and hopefully more expressive too!

So here are a few Hebrew words for **Praise**:

Hallah: Ps.22:23. To shine, boast, celebrate, commend, sing and implies the unashamed use of our voice in demonstration of what we think of God; a complete abandonment of self because we are in love (with God) as in marriage - head over heels in love!

Tehillah: Ps.22:3;25. To sing or laud; derived from **hallal** and usually means the singing of **hallals**. It is perceived as involving music, especially singing. It is the praise that God inhabits, implying that God has responded to, and is enthroned in the midst of praise

Yadah (Judah): Ps.9:1; Ps.52:9. Thankful expression of praise from a word meaning to throw out the hand; hence to lift up hands (hands are an extension of our personalities).

Barak: Ps.96:2; Ps.103:1. To kneel, bless, salute. Of all the words for praise, this is the only one that infers some kind of silence. To praise God (**barak**) is to enthrone Him as Lord - to kneel before Him; thus when He no longer has pre-eminence in our lives we praise (**barak**) someone or something else. This is called a curse (see Job 1:5 where **barak** is translated "curse").

Zamar (Gk psalmos): Ps.47:7. To make music, literally to pluck the strings and sing praises accompanied by that music.

Towdah: Ps.50:23. Thanksgiving. A sacrifice of praise or thanks before receiving the manifestation in total agreement with the Word. It is an act of faith beyond which God moves to bring deliverance. Also implies lifting of hands; in Leviticus it is used in connection with offering of thanksgiving which has already been examined for purity (Lev.7:12/13/15 Lev.22:29).

Sunday 9th September 2012 Ps.36 Acts 5:17-6:7

Where were you born?

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken and everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph went to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.^{Lk.2:1-4} **Bethlehem** (which means **House of Bread**) is a very significant place in the Bible. It was where Rachel was buried,^{Gen.35:19} where David was born^{1Sam.17:12} and also where Jesus was born.^{Matt.2:1;Lk.2:15}

The Bible is an historically accurate book and written to assure Believers of their eternal life: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:13} But it is like a Pictionary (which defines words by pictures) because it illustrates our Redemption (i.e. Jesus and how we relate to Him) through real life stories. **So Bethlehem - a House of Bread is a picture of the Church – a place where we are fed – spiritually, emotionally and physically**

Bread is made from flour, which is milled grain. The Bible describe preachers as people who thresh grain i.e. separate the grain from the chaff: *Elders who do their work well should be respected and paid well, especially those who work hard at both preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain." And in another place, "Those who work deserve their pay!"*^{1Tim.5:17-18;} (This passage also explains that those who preach can be paid for their work c.f. *Don't move around from home to home. Stay in one place, eating and drinking what they provide. Don't hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve their pay.*^{Lk.10:7NLT}) In the OT the Levites were the preachers: *they instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.*^{Neh.8:7-8NLT}

As God fed the Israelites with manna from heaven so He feeds us with spiritual bread ^{Jn.6:32-51} so we won't hunger^{vs 35} or die^{vs 50} and are included in the resurrection.^{vs 39} **The Church's role is to feed us spiritually**, explaining the meaning [of the Bible] and helping us understand each passage^{Neh.8:8} but it is also a place of practical support too - the **Gospel is both spiritual and social.**

Good can be the enemy of the best and social work without the Gospel is good but can be a distraction from God's best. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354- 430) said that *the good works of an unregenerate person is in God's sight only so many splendid sins* - in other words, if we do not yet know God, even our very best will never be good enough to please Him.

Our Church's emphasis is on spiritual food but without exercise we will become "fat" and lazy. Eglon was very fat and when Ehud struck him with a sword he died.^{Judges 3:12f} This is a picture of people who only "eat" spiritually and don't "exercise" spiritually (*who hear God's Word but does not put them into practice.*^{Matt.7:24-27}) - then God's Word can be really dangerous! We must *grow in wisdom stature and favour with God and man*^{Lk.2:52; 1Sam 2:26} -

a balance between spiritual and practical. The qualifications for working for God are *full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.*^{Acts 6:4} When we are full, the slightest jolt or disturbance will cause us to spill whatever we are full of - the Holy Spirit and wisdom! Wisdom is applied knowledge – using what we know.

Church should not only "feed" us with spiritual food but also provide for our emotional needs - a place of good company, wholesome company with a *feel good factor* so we go home happy and contented (if we are at peace with God!) *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.*^{2Cor.1:3-7NLT}

Church should also provide for our physical needs^{Acts 6:1-4} but it is **not** a form of "Christian Communism" where all are equal under the "leaders" and have to conform to their rules. **God has made us all equal but we are all unique individuals and not intended to be the same as each other.** *"Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don't let anyone call you 'Teacher,' for*

you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. ^{Matt.23:8-12 NLT}

God has consistently instructed us to care for the vulnerable: *Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.* ^{Is.1:17 also Dent.14:29}

Suppose you think your beliefs are right because of how you live. But you don't control what you say. Then you are fooling yourselves. Your beliefs are not worth anything at all. Here are the kinds of beliefs that God our Father accepts as pure and without fault. When widows and children who have no parents are in trouble, take care of them. And keep yourselves from being polluted by the world. ^{Just.1:26-27 NLT}

But God has also included clear instructions about lazy people: *Anyone who will not work will not eat* ^{2Thess.3:9-13 also Tit.1:9-16} Adam was instructed to work before he sinned ^{Gen.2:15} and

work is essential for self-esteem but not all work has to be paid work! **Believers should work the hardest and the best:** *Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.* ^{Col.3:23 NLT also Eccl.9:10}

If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success. Using a dull axe requires great strength, so sharpen the blade. That's the value of wisdom; it helps you succeed. ^{Eccl.10:10 NLT} We need to apply God's Word with wisdom not wear our self out trying to "make it work": *A fool's work wearies him.* ^{Eccl.10:15}

Home is where your heart is! but we normally think of "home" as where we were brought up. God has good news for us because He has promised to "re-write" our "birth-certificate" and regardless of where we were "brought up" spiritually, we can call "Zion" our home: *"I will record Egypt and Babylon among those who acknowledge me— Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Ethiopia—and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.' "* *Indeed, of Zion it will be said, "This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her."* *The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: "This one was born in Zion."* ^{Ps.87:4-6}

Let us make "Bethlehem" our home and live in the place of God's abundant provision

How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings. You feed them from the abundance of your own house, letting them drink from your river of delights. For you are the fountain of life, the light by which we see. Pour out your unfailing love on those who love you; give justice to those with honest hearts. ^{Ps.36:7-10 NLT}

Sunday 16th August 2012 Ps.73 Acts 6:8 - 7:1-60

How would you defend your faith if your life depended on it?

All the best stories, essays and defence arguments are structured – they have a beginning, a middle and a conclusion. (We mostly remember the last thing we heard unless it is a humorous anecdote -which always seems to be indelibly etched into our mind regardless of whether it is relevant!) You need to know what you want to achieve – your goal, objective or purpose - and start with something that will connect with your audience or readers (something that they can identify with) and then take them on a journey towards your goal. This should be able to be summarised briefly, preferably in a single sentence.

Stephen's goal was to explain that Jesus is the Righteous One (God's Messiah). ^{Acts 7:52}

His opportunity was ready made for him as he had been accused of blasphemy. ^{Acts 6:11} His starting point was Abraham ^{Acts 7:2} who was the father of the Jews but also the Father of our faith: *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* ^{Rom.4:16 Also Lk.3:8}

The charge against Stephen was: *This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.*^{Acts 7:13-14NASB} Although Stephen's indicters were unreliable as witnesses, the issue of blasphemy inflamed the passions of the Jews beyond reason and Stephen had just a few minutes to give his defence of his faith before the crowd would turn into a lynch mob.

Actually the charges against Stephen were true – the Temple and Moses' law were now obsolete because they had only been temporary and a better system had been introduced: *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:10-13} *Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary... its first room ...was called the Holy Place. ...The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning... gifts and sacrifices ...are external regulations applying until the time of the new order. But when Christ came as high priest ...he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.*^{Heb.9:1;8-12} *"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.*^{Heb.10:17-20}

It is easy for us to glibly gloss over this transformation from Old Covenant to New Covenant but the Jews had more than 1000 years of tradition to overcome. It would be like trying to get us to abandon the values of the Magna Carta by telling us there was something better! Or even getting us to change our language – we have used English for hundreds of years! Most of us would take some persuading!

In Stephen's defence of the Faith, he explained that the Jewish traditions, as recorded in the Scriptures, were all pointing towards this New Covenant and actually it was very clear if you could look at the Scripture without prejudice. God had taken Israel on a journey to get them to where they were and all along the way He had reminded them of a coming Redeemer – the Righteous One who would be greater than Moses: *"This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.'*^{Acts 7:37}

Sadly their ancestors had continually rejected God's help and God's Helpers but this generation was worse because they had not only killed God's messengers, they had actually killed the Righteous One!

When Peter made the same accusation of murdering Jesus to his audience, the people repented.^{Acts 2:36-41} But this crowd became enraged and erupted into a riot mob. **People must choose whether they will accept God's way as right or reject God's way.**

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."^{Acts 17:32} *Paul witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.*^{Acts 28:23-24} Although the crowd murdered Stephen, his death was not in vain. Stephen visibly saw Jesus standing up to welcome him home and the Holy Spirit used this event to convict Paul, who was to become Christianity's greatest theologian and apologetic. (Apologetics is the discipline of defending a position through the systematic use of information).

No defence of our faith is ever insignificant. Even talking with other Believers has God's full attention: *Those who had respect for the LORD talked with one another. They cheered each other up. And the LORD heard them. A list of people and what they did was written on a scroll in front of him. It included the names of those who respected the LORD and honoured him.*^{Mal.3:16NIV} I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.^{Phile.1:6}

We must be clear in our goal of communicating Jesus Christ as the Living Lord: Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.^{2Tim.1:7-8} **Faith in Jesus is the only solution to the world's problems as well as to individual peoples' problems and this faith comes from hearing about Him:** Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.^{Rom.10:17}

That should encourage us to speak up!

Sunday 23rd September 2012. Ps.74:12-23 Acts 8:1-25

What's in a name?

'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'" 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected. 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'^{Through the Looking-Glass}

We communicate predominately through words (which are an audible or written expression of our thoughts). Language changes every 40 years, so the words I use, may well have a different meaning for my grandchildren in the same way that my grandparent's vocabulary was different from mine. For instance "amazed" used to mean "alarmed or terrified" and is still used to mean "made crazy" in some local dialects. "Aweful" meant 'full of awe' i.e. something wonderful, delightful, but now it means the opposite. Today, words like "gay", "stoned", "weed" have very different connotations from my school days.

In Acts 8, Simon is described as a "sorcerer" but the Greek word is *Magi* (from where we get "magic") and the same name given to Jesus' visitors in Matthew chapter 2. The Greek language did not differentiate between *holy* "wise-men" and *occult* "wise-men" in the way that our English language does. The Greek word "*pharmakeia*" is translated "sorcery" or "witchcraft"^{Gal.5:20} and means *the use of medicine, drugs or spells*. Obviously we do not believe that taking medication is "witchcraft" (even though some of our early Pentecostal pioneers did!!) although the Bible, quite literally, says so. Simon left his "magi" past when he heard about Jesus and was water-baptised as a Believer.^{Acts 8:13} However Simon's past had not left him and most of us can identify with this, at least to some extent.

This story of Simon the Sorcerer gives us an insight into how our past can affect us. It also reminds us to be careful how we conduct our lives, because our today will influence our tomorrow.

In Simon's past he was **proud** and *boasted that he was someone great.*^{Acts8:9} **How different from Jesus, who set an example for us:** *In your relationships with one another, have the same mind-set as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by*

becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place...^{Phil.2:5-9}

Pride was satan's downfall,^{Is.14:13} is detested by God^{Prov.16:5} and goes before destruction.^{Prov.16:18} True love knows no pride^{1Cor.13:4} and God withholds His grace from the proud but gives it to the humble.^{1Pet.5:5} God expects us to humble before Him: *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*^{Micah 6:8} We can however, (and should) boast about God: *In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.*^{Psa.44:8} (Actually the word *Hallelujah* means to boast about God!)

Paul does mention that we can “take pride in our selves”^{Gal.6:4} but the context is about taking responsibility for ourselves: *Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. For we are each responsible for our own conduct.*^{Gal.6:4-5NLT}

Peter told Simon: *your heart is not right before God... For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.*^{Acts8:21-22} **Bitterness and anger gives sin a foothold:** And “don't sin by letting anger control you.” *Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.*^{Eph.4:26-27NLT} **Sin wants to master all of us but God said we must master sin:** “Why are you so angry?” the LORD asked Cain. “Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.”^{Gen.4:6-7NLT}

All sin begins in our “heart” as a thought: *But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you.*^{Matt.15:18-20NLT} And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, “God is tempting me.” God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. *Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*^{Jas.1:13-15NLT}

So how can we protect ourselves from sin? Simon's baptism did not “protect” him from wrong thoughts, words or actions, nor will baptism “protect” us (although it is important to be baptised as a Believer^{Mk16:16; Lk.7:29-30}). Neither will attending Church, saying “prayers”, giving or helping others, “protect” us. **Actually there is no “protection” - only God's promise that we can “overcome” because Jesus has overcome:** *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33} **It is our faith that enables us to overcome:** *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{Jn.5:4-5}

Faith is voice activated and we must talk about what we believe: *They overcame him because the Lamb gave his life's blood for them. They overcame him by giving witness about Jesus to others. They were willing to risk their lives, even if it led to death.*^{Rev.12:11NLT}

Because we become the product of our thoughts we should think on good things: *For as he thinks within himself, so he is.*^{Prov.23:7NASB} It is also important to make the right choices: *For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.*^{Heb.5:13-14NLT} **However if we do make the wrong choice there is a way to put it right:** *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*^{Jn.1:9}

Don't worry about anything. Instead, tell God about everything. Ask and pray. Give thanks to him. Then God's peace will watch over your hearts and your minds because you belong to Christ Jesus. God's

peace can never be completely understood. Finally, my brothers and sisters, always think about what is true. Think about what is noble, right and pure. Think about what is lovely and worthy of respect. If anything is excellent or worthy of praise, think about those kinds of things. Do what you have learned or received or heard from me. Follow my example. The God who gives peace will be with you.^{Phil.4:6-9NIrV}

Whatever words we use to describe our past, our present or our future, let's make sure we mean what God means and actually agree with Him – that's FAITH

Sunday 30th September 2012. Ps.75 Acts 8:26-40

Do you understand what you read?

GCSEs aren't fit for purpose because school-leavers don't master the three Rs, says CBI. *The importance of GCSEs may need to be downgraded because tens of thousands of school-leavers haven't mastered the three Rs, business leaders have warned.*^{Daily Mail 23 May 2012}

Literacy refers to the ability to read for knowledge, write coherently, and think critically about the written word (read, write, spell, listen, and speak.) and means to be able to understand what you read and then communicate that meaning to others. The basic literacy skills we learn at school are called the **3R's: Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic** – which seem ironic in that context! Actually the first mention of the **3R's** is in “*The Confessions of Saint Augustine*” AD 401 – “*For those first lessons, reading, writing and arithmetic, I thought as great a burden and penalty as any Greek.*” There are also **3R's** in Christianity literacy: **Repentance, Remission of sins and Righteousness**. Without a basic understanding of these 3R's we will be more disadvantaged than not understanding **Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic**.

Repentance. The Greek word is **μετάνοια** (metanoia) which means a *change of mind*. Margaret Thatcher famously said “*the lady is not for turning?*” and we need to be convinced of our own position: *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.*^{Jas.1:5-8NLT} But a Christian is someone who is prepared to look at the Truth and align their views to God's view. Contrast this with a bigot who is intolerant of any ideas other than their own. Repentance is different from remorse (which is feeling sorry for being found out!) and true repentance changes lives but leaves no scars: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*^{Matt.3:8} *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*^{2Cor.7:10}

True repentance from sin will always include:

Acknowledgement of the wrong.

Apology for the wrong.

Action of determination to change.

Appreciation of God's forgiveness.

Attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people.

We need to change our minds about God as well as what He says about sin and ourselves and then believe what God believes: *You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.*^{Phil.2:5NIrV} *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (let your way of thinking be completely changed^{NIrV}). Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*^{Rom.12:2} God is love;^{1Jn.4:16} He loves the

world,^{Jn.3:16} the Church^{Eph.5:25} and also us as individuals.^{Gal.2:20} This means that He is not angry^{Ls.54:9} with us anymore because He has forgiven our sins: LORD, *who is a God like you? You forgive sin. You forgive your people when they do what is wrong. You don't stay angry forever. Instead, you take delight in showing your faithful love to them.*^{Micab 7:18Nlrv} In fact God loves so much that He smiles upon us: *The LORD spoke to Moses. He said, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, Here is how I want you to bless the people of Israel. Say to them, "May the LORD bless you and take good care of you. May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. May the LORD look on you with favour and give you his peace."* In that way they will put the blessing of my name on the people of Israel. And I will bless them.^{Nu.6:22-27Nlrv} That certainly takes a change of thinking! But woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, (what sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator.^{NLT})^{Is.45:9}

Remission of Sins. Then opened he their mind, that they might understand the scriptures; and he said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.^{Lk.24:25-47ASV} **Remission** ἄφεσις (aphesis) means dismissal or release and is also translated forgiveness or freedom: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim **freedom** for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to **set** the oppressed **free**, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*^{Lk.4:18-19} **God has dismissed our sins from us and we are no longer joined to them.** For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.^{Ps.103:111-113NLT} **Yes those of us who believe in Jesus Christ are free from our sins!** Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.^{Acts13:38-39} To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.^{Rev.1:5}

Righteousness. The English word means "**right-wise-ness**" - we are right with God and wise about it (i.e. we are acting upon the information).

How are we "right with God"? Christ didn't have any sin. But God made him become sin for us. So we can be made right with God because of what Christ has done for us.^{2Cor.5:21Nlrv}

But now God has shown us how to become right with him. The Law and the Prophets give witness to this. It has nothing to do with obeying the law. We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe. It is no different for the Jews than for anyone else. Everyone has sinned. No one measures up to God's glory. The free gift of God's grace makes all of us right with him. Christ Jesus paid the price to set us free. God gave him as a sacrifice to pay for sins. So he forgives the sins of those who have faith in his blood.^{Rom.3:21-25Nlrv}

How are we acting on this information (that we are right with God)?

We will be bold: *but the righteous are as bold as a lion.*^{Pron.28:1}

Bold to come to God - *So let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it.*^{Heb.4:16Nlrv}

Bold to proclaim Jesus *"You can't be saved by believing in anyone else. God has given us no other name under heaven that will save us."* The leaders saw how bold Peter and John were. They also realized that Peter and John were ordinary men with no training. This surprised the leaders. They realized that these men had been with Jesus.^{Acts4:12-13Nlrv}

Our praying will be effective: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.^{1Pet.3:12}

How literate are you? By now we should all be able to explain to others the basics of 3R's in Christianity literacy: **Repentance, Remission of sins and Righteousness** because we *have trained [our]selves with a lot of practice and can tell the difference between good and evil.*^{Heb.5:14NIrV}

October: Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? John 14:1

Sunday 7th October 2012. Ps.78:1-8. Matt.13:1-24

Harvest

The Bible uses nature for a lot of illustrations because it was written before urban life developed and everyone was "close to nature". Since we are all dependant on nature for food these illustrations are still relevant today even though the agriculture methods may have changed.

One of the most common Scriptures to consider at Harvest is *As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.*^{Gen.8:22} God did not say that every harvest will be bountiful, but that days, months and seasons would rotate – that there will be a harvest time next year even as there will be a morning after each night. It is always good to acknowledge and give thanks for any gift and so Harvest services are a time to acknowledge *that every good and perfect gift is from God*^{1as.1:17} and to thank Him for the seasons and crops that provide our food. Although we (or a farmer) may have done the hard work of sowing and reaping, we acknowledge that it is God who gives us the ability to work and that He is the source of everything: *You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.*^{Deut.18:17-18}

But harvest time is not restricted to food – it applies to everything including our words and attitudes: *Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others - ignoring God! - harvests a crop of weeds. All he'll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life. So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit.*^{Gal.6:7-9TM}

What and how we sow will determine what and how we reap: *Here's what I've observed. People gather a crop from what they plant. If they plant evil and trouble, that's what they will harvest.*^{Job.4:8NIrV} *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*^{2Cor.9:6} *Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity, and the rod they wield in fury will be broken. The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.*^{Prov.22:8-9}

Jesus told a story of a Farmer who planted a field where the seeds were the words Jesus had spoken and the different growths of those seeds represented the attitudes of various people:^{Matt.13:1-24}

Stony they are so indifferent that they don't even think about God and life with Him

Shallow they like the benefits but don't want to pay the price – they don't want the inconvenience of changing their lifestyle

Suffocated they mean well to start with and intend to change, but the "now" life blinds them to the future life – they allow worry and cares to dominate their life

Sound they hear about God and His love and accept what God says about sin, self and the Saviour. *And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest.*^{Lk.8:15NLT}

What group do think you are in: Stony, Shallow, Suffocated or Sound?

The good news is that if you are in the first 3 groups you can change because God is the very best Farmer who will cultivate your heart to allow you to produce a *crop that is a hundred times as much as has been planted.*^{Lk.8:8}

So how can we change? The Bible refers to “turning to the Lord”. When the people read the Bible, it doesn’t mean much to them, but when anyone turns to the Lord, it makes sense and they can know God personally – **this is called faith in Christ:** *But their minds were made stubborn. To this very day, the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. The veil has not been removed. Only faith in Christ can take it away. To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, freedom is also there. Our faces are not covered with a veil. We all display the Lord's glory. We are being changed to become more like him so that we have more and more glory. And the glory comes from the Lord, who is the Holy Spirit.*^{2Cor.3:14-18NIV}

Faith is as profound as knowing God but as simple as ABC

A - Admit you are a sinner: separated from God and spiritually dead. *There is no one righteous, not even one.*^{Rom.3:10}

B - Believe that Jesus death paid the penalty for your sin: *The punishment that brought us peace was upon him*^{Is.53:5}

- **Believe** that God raised Jesus from the dead and He is your Lord (owner): *That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*^{Rom.10:9} *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.*^{Acts 16:26}

C - Change the ownership of your life to Jesus. Making a quality decision to change is repentance. *Repent then and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.*^{Acts 3:19}

D - Doing: ‘Believing’ alone is not enough. You must act on what you say you believe. *Faith without deeds is dead.*^{Jas.2:26}

E - Experience: If you want to experience this spiritual new birth, pray this prayer...

Dear God, I come to You in the name of Jesus.

I know I am a sinner, I cannot save myself and need Your forgiveness.

I believe that Jesus paid the price for my sins when He died and that You raised Him from the dead.

I confess that Jesus is my Lord and receive Your forgiveness for my sins.

Thank You for giving me a new, holy and righteous spirit that will never be separated from You.

I promise to love, honour and obey You for the rest of my life.

You are my Father and I am Your child.

Amen

Sunday 14th October 2012. Ps.76. Acts 9

What is Conversion?

The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.^{Acts15:3}

Conversion literally means to turn around – to make an about turn and face the opposite way. In the Christian context conversion means we recognised that we had our backs to God and were heading for total disaster (see The Good Samaritan story: *A man*

was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers attacked him. They stripped off his clothes and beat him. Then they went away, leaving him almost dead.^{Lk.10:30f} **BUT** when God called us, we turned to face Him, believed Him and are now totally blessed: Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. Those blessings come from the heavenly world. They belong to us because we belong to Christ.^{Eph.1:3NIrV}

Paul's Conversion recorded in Acts9 was very dramatic and different from most people's experience, but then Paul was very different from most people. He was an extremist, a bigot and on a mission to destroy every Christian!

God wants us to know Him: He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.^{2Pet.3:9} God also makes it easy for us to know Him by **leading** us through experiences^{Ps.23;Is.43:21} (not "**leaving**" us in experiences!) and introducing us to people who will influence us in just the right way to get our attention so we will listen to Him.

God does speak to us if only we will listen: God does speak—sometimes one way and sometimes another—even though people may not understand it. He speaks in a dream or a vision of the night when people are in a deep sleep, lying on their beds. He speaks in their ears and frightens them with warnings to turn them away from doing wrong and to keep them from being proud. God does this to save people from death, to keep them from dying.... God does all these things to a person two or even three times so he won't die as punishment for his sins and so he may still enjoy life.^{Job33:14-30NCV}

God speaks through Creation: Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made. So people have no excuse for what they do.^{Rom.1:20:NIrV}

God speaks through our conscience: Even when [those] who do not have God's written law, instinctively follow what the law says, they show that in their hearts they know right from wrong. They demonstrate that God's law is written within them, for their own consciences either accuse them or tell them they are doing what is right. The day will surely come when God, by Jesus Christ, will judge everyone's secret life. This is my message.^{Rom.2:14-16 NLT}

God speaks through the Canon of Scripture – including the OT: 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'^{Lk.16:29-31}

God speaks through Christ Jesus: In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.^{Heb.1:1-2} If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.^{Jn.15:22}

Because we are intrinsically complacent and love to procrastinate, most of us needed a "wake-up-call" before we would really listen to God! Usually God gets our attention when we are feeling vulnerable and then the Holy Spirit challenges, convicts, converts, counsels and comforts us!

Conversion will include these 5 principles

1. We are challenged about opposing God: Why are you opposing me?^{Acts9:4NIrV} Sin is not just "evil" but is everything that opposes God or less than His perfect standard: For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.^{Rom.3:23NLT} In fact unbelief is sin: Everything that is not based on faith is sin.^{Rom.14:23NIrV}

2. We are confronted with Jesus as the Son of God: "I am Jesus," he replied. "I am the one you are opposing."^{Acts9:5NIrV} "You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God." Jesus replied,

‘Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! No mere man showed this to you. My Father in heaven showed it to you.’^{Matt.16:16-17}

3. We have our eyes opened: *Right away something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. And he could see again.*^{Acts 9:18} Our spiritual eyes are opened and we can see Jesus, especially in the Scriptures: *Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*^{Lk.24:31-32}

4. We are baptised: *He got up and was baptised.*^{Acts9:18} Baptism is more than a religious bath (or shower)! Although Paul writes that there is one baptism,^{Eph.4:5} **Baptism** incorporates **conversion, empowerment and a good conscience.** The **Holy Spirit baptises us into the body of Christ (conversion)** *We were all baptized by one Holy Spirit into one body*^{1Cor.12:13} *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life*^{Rom.6:3-4}; **Jesus baptises us with the Holy Spirit (empowerment):** *One who is more powerful than I am will come.... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*^{Lk.3:16} *John baptized with water. But in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you... And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.*^{Acts1:5-8} and **Believers are water-baptised (a good conscience)** *And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.3:21NLT} *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*^{Mk.16:16;Lk.7:29-30}

5. We have our mouths opened: *He taught that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{Acts9:20;22;28} We proclaim that Jesus is God's Son, our Saviour and God's answer for the world.

Which way are you facing?

Don't wait until disaster hits you – turn to God now and live in the blessings of fellowship with Him – then keep tuned in to Him and don't wander off the *path of Righteousness.*^{Ps.23:3}

Sunday 21st October 2012 Ps.77. Acts 9.

The Gospel is Simple Settled and Spiritual

We believe in a “Full Gospel” where God's Good News affects our spirit, soul and body. *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.*^{Rom.1:1-4} We are not just saved from hell in order to get into heaven (although that is true). We are saved from our sins in order to serve a Living Saviour! *You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*^{Matt.1:21} *You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*^{1Thes.1:9}

Jesus exactly represented God: *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God,*^{Col.1:15NLT} *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*^{Heb.1:3} Although we are not the exact representation of God, (i.e. we are not yet perfect) we are like Jesus: *God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them... In this world we are like Jesus.*^{1Jn.4:16-17} So today Christians are God's representatives on earth and the closest examples of God that the world will see! *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his*

appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.^{2Cor.5:20} That's why we will always be different from the world – in fact we cannot be the same as the world: *Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.*^{Jas.4:4NLT} *If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you.*^{Jn.15:18-19NLT} *Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.*^{Jn.2:15-17NLT} Obviously this word “world” means the world’s system not people because God loves the people of the world: *For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:16} The Gospel is God’s Good News, is based on the resurrection of Jesus and brings salvation: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8} *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.*^{Rom.1:16}

The Gospel is Simple. Because the Full Gospel that we believe and proclaim affects every part of our being- spirit, soul and body, we expect to live a healthier, happier and holier life than non-Believers and these 3 adjectives are connected. Someone commented that “*It takes a Theologian to make the Bible complicated!*” but actually the Gospel is simple and uncomplicated: *Jesus said, “What I'm about to tell you is true. You need to change and become like little children. If you don't, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Anyone who becomes as free of pride as this child is the most important in the kingdom of heaven.*^{Matt.18:3-4NIV} Simple does not mean a cheap copy or low value like the *basics* in the supermarket! The Gospel is simple in its precepts and practice. It is important that some people ponder the profound depths of God but we must keep the day-to-day practice of Christianity simple, especially in evangelism and ministry. When Peter healed the sick and raised the dead, he had no “all-night prayer meeting”, choir or “worship” band! In fact he asked the people to leave whilst he prayed a very simple prayer to God who answers prayer. Prayer only works if God answers! No amount of crying, fasting or pleading will change God’s mind but if we pray God’s Will, He will answer: *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*^{1Jn.5:14-15}

The Gospel is Settled. The Gospel has not changed, nor will it ever change: *Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*^{Jn.19:30} When Jesus ministry on earth was finished our salvation was completed. No-one can add to, or take away from, what Jesus accomplished. Our right standing with God cannot be bought or bartered for, because it is beyond price. God freely gave it to us: *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*^{Rom.1:17} *When you sin, the pay you get is death. But God gives you the gift of eternal life because of what Christ Jesus our Lord has done.*^{Rom.6:23NIV}

The Gospel is Spiritual. The Gospel involves another dimension than the natural world that we know with our senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste). It is the super-natural dimension - God’s world - which is experienced with our spirit and involves a reality that is not seen. *The God that Abraham believed in gives life to the dead.*

Abraham's God also speaks of things that do not exist as if they do exist.^{Rom.4:17NIrV} God set rules to govern the world He created (we call them the “laws of physics”) like day and night, yearly seasons, gravity, growing old etc. but God is greater than His “laws” and can over-rule them at any time. That is why Jesus was able to walk on water, change water into wine, heal the sick, raise the dead etc. The Gospel opens the door to “God’s world” – the unseen spirit world that is as real as the natural world. Some people try to access this world other ways but they are all frightening, demonic, deceptive, dangerous and deadly. God’s way is healthy, happy and holy and leads to peace but is only accessed through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.*^{Rom.5:1-2}

Keep the Gospel Simple, Settled and Spiritual

Sunday 28th October 2012. Ps.24. Acts 10

Are you clean enough to meet God?

Acts 10 describes the turning point in the early Christian Church. Peter had the revelation that God loved the whole world not just the Jewish world. Until then the Christian Jews did not meet with non-Jews: *Peter said to them, “You know that it is against our law for a Jew to have anything to do with those who aren't Jews.*^{Acts10:28} Generally the Jews did not have anything to do with Samaritans but they were tolerated: *The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew. I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” She said this because Jews don't have anything to do with Samaritans.*^{Jn.4:9} The Samaritans had already believed in Jesus: *Then the Samaritans came to him... So he stayed two days. Because of his words, many more people became believers.*^{Jn.4:40-41} *The apostles in Jerusalem heard that people in Samaria had accepted God's word... Then Peter and John placed their hands on them. And they received the Holy Spirit.*^{Acts8:14-17} After Peter had preached to the Romans, he was summonsed to Jerusalem because he had mixed with non-Jews: *Peter went up to Jerusalem. There the Jewish believers found fault with him. They said, “You went into the house of those who aren't Jews. You ate with them.”*^{Acts11:2-3} This segregation continued for some time afterwards.^(see Gal.2:11-16)

The reason for this apartheid was the fear of becoming “unclean”. The OT emphasises that God is clean or holy and only “clean” or “holy” people can approach Him. Most of the Jews thought the rules and rituals of the OT were the real substance of the true religion instead of symbolic. *So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.*^{Col.2:16-17NLT} So when Jesus instituted the New Covenant the old became obsolete: *When God speaks of a “new” covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13NLT}

Under the OT it was essential to remain ceremoniously “clean” by not touching anything that was “unclean”: *“You must be able to tell the difference between what is holy and what is not. You must be able to tell the difference between what is ‘clean’ and what is not.”*^{Lev.10:10NIrV} If someone became unclean they had to go into quarantine and then have a bath (from where we get our baptism): *On the seventh day the person who is not ‘clean’ must be made pure and clean. The one who is being made ‘clean’ must wash his clothes. He must take a bath. Then that evening he will be ‘clean.’*^{Nu.19:19NIrV}

The Jews treated non-Jews as “unclean” because God had chosen them to be a holy nation of Priests: *Now obey me completely. Keep my covenant. If you do, then out of all of the nations you will be my special*

treasure. The whole earth is mine. But you will be a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation.^{Ex.19:5-6NirV} Sadly they rebelled against God's instructions and instead of ministering God's love to the rest of the world, they kept themselves separate from them. **God has given the world another opportunity to receive His Good News by giving this ministry to us:** *They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them. But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.*^{1Pet.2:8-9NLT} Although the OT is now obsolete, the ministry of showing God's goodness is certainly not obsolete, BUT the conditions are still the same – **we need clean hands and a pure heart:** *Who can go up to the temple on the hill of the LORD? Who can stand in his holy place? Anyone who has clean hands and a pure heart.*^{Ps.24:3-4NirV}

So how do we become clean? Under the OT if anything touched the altar it became holy: *Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy.*^{Ex.29:37} ...*the altar that makes the gift holy.*^{Matt.23:19NirV} *A seraph flew over to me. He was holding a hot coal. He had used tongs to take it from the altar. He touched my mouth with the coal. He said, "This has touched your lips. Your guilt has been taken away. Your sin has been paid for."*^{Mk.6:5-7} **In the NT we still need to "touch the altar" – not the stone altar where animals were burnt but the real "altar" of Jesus sacrificial death at Calvary:** *Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2}

Once we are clean, we don't need to go into quarantine if we do sin again: *if anyone does sin, we have an advocate.*^{1Jn.2:1} *A person who has had a bath needs to wash only his feet. The rest of his body is clean. And you are clean.*^{Jn.13:10} **God's Word keeps us holy:** *Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth.*^{Jn.17:17NLT} *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.*^{Eph.5:25-26}

Today we cannot become "unclean" by coming into contact with "unholy" objects or people because: *the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.*^{1Jn.4:4NLT} "Uncleanness" comes from within a person not from outside: *Nothing outside of you can make you 'unclean' by going into you. It is what comes out of you that makes you 'unclean.'* ...*Don't you see? Nothing that enters people from the outside can make them 'unclean.' It doesn't go into the heart. It goes into the stomach. Then it goes out of the body. What comes out of people makes them 'unclean.'* ...*evil things come from inside a person [and] make him 'unclean.'*^{Mk.7:14-23NirV} Not even a statue of Buddha in the Chinese Restaurant can pollute our spirits because it is not a deity but an idol that has no life: *We know that a god made by human hands is really nothing at all in the world. We know there is only one God. There may be so-called gods either in heaven or on earth. . . But for us there is only one God. He is the Father... And there is only one Lord. He is Jesus Christ. All things came because of him, and we live because of him. But not everyone knows that. Some people still think that statues of gods are real gods. When they eat food that was offered to statues of gods, they think of it as food that was offered to real gods. And because they have a weak sense of what is right and wrong, they feel guilty. But food doesn't bring us close to God. We are no worse if we don't eat. We are no better if we do eat. But be careful how you use your freedom.*^{1Cor.8:1-9NirV}

Are you clean enough to meet God?

If you have received Jesus,^{Jn.1:12} **you are clean, so don't think of yourself as "unclean" or "not good enough."**

Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.^{Acts10:15NLT}

November: And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Colossians 3:17

Sunday 4th November 2012 Ps.81:1-7 Prayer for the Persecuted Church

The Fellowship of Suffering

So do not be ashamed to tell people about our Lord Jesus, and do not be ashamed of me, in prison for the Lord. But suffer with me for the Good News... I am suffering now because I tell the Good News, but I am not ashamed, because I know Jesus, the One in whom I have believed. And I am sure he is able to protect what he has trusted me with until that day.^{2Tim.1:8-12NCV}

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.^{2Cor.2:14} **We believe, preach and practice a**

Victorious Gospel of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead... This is my gospel*^{2Tim.2:8} But the next verse (which is actually the same sentence) states: *for which I am suffering.* There is an aspect of **Christian Fellowship** that includes **suffering** which is **central** to our glorious Gospel rather than conflicting with it: *For which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*^{2Tim.2:9}

Fellowship is communion (**common-union**), a sharing and a partnership: *God... has called [us] into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*^{1Cor.1:9} but if we share in Jesus resurrection, we will have to share in His sufferings first: *As his children, we will receive all that he has for us. We will share what Christ receives. But we must share in his sufferings if we want to share in his glory.*^{Rom.8:17NIrV} *I want to know Christ better. I want to know the power that raised him from the dead. I want to share in his sufferings. I want to become like him by sharing in his death. Then by God's grace I will rise from the dead.*^{Phil.3:10-11NIrV}

This sharing in Jesus's suffering is not redemptive in any way – Jesus did that for us,^(see Is.53) **neither is it punishment for our sins.** No! This suffering is because we are in fellowship with Jesus Christ, God's Son. The devil, and this world under his influence, hates God and everything that belongs to Him. Jesus said: *Does the world hate you? Remember that it hated me first... If people hated me and tried to hurt me, they will do the same to you... They will treat you like that because of my name. They do not know the One who sent me... as their Law says, 'They hated me without any reason.'*^{Jn.15:18-25NIrV}

So suffering is not unusual for Christians: *Dear friends, don't be surprised by the painful suffering you are going through. Don't feel as if something strange were happening to you. Be joyful that you are taking part in Christ's sufferings. Then you will be filled with joy when Christ returns in glory. Suppose people make fun of you because you believe in Christ. Then you are blessed, because God's Spirit rests on you. He is the Spirit of glory.*^{1Pet.4:12-14NIrV} But when we suffer it should be for doing good and not for doing wrong: *Suppose you suffer. Then it shouldn't be because you are a murderer or a thief. It shouldn't be because you do evil things. It shouldn't be because you poke your nose into other people's business. But suppose you suffer for being a Christian. Then don't be ashamed. Instead, praise God because you are known by that name.*^{1Pet.4:14-16NIrV}

Suffering is painful – painful for those who are suffering and painful for those who see loved ones suffer and so we empathise as well as sympathise with our fellow believers: *Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*^{Heb.13:1-3} Concern for others is basic human instinct although some people have had their consciences seared.^{1Tim.4:2} But Believers are aware that all human life is created in God's image and precious to Him and so suffering is an attack on God Himself. Although God loves the whole world,^{Jn.3:16} Believers are

especially precious to God – enough to be likened to the “apple of God’s eye”: *He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye.* ^{Dent.32:10;Ps.17:8;Zech.2:8}

When suffering comes, God will not abandon us – whatever the cause of it. *But God saves suffering people while they are suffering. He speaks to them while they are hurting.* ^{Job.26:15} God will see us through the suffering and our faith will grow as we depend more and more on Him: *My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.* ^{Ps.119:50} *So don't be proud. Put yourselves under God's mighty hand. Then he will honour you at the right time. Turn all your worries over to him. He cares about you. Control yourselves. Be on your guard. Your enemy the devil is like a roaring lion. He prowls around looking for someone to chew up and swallow. Stand up to him. Stand firm in what you believe. All over the world you know that your brothers and sisters are going through the same kind of suffering. God always gives you all the grace you need. So you will only have to suffer for a little while. Then God himself will build you up again. He will make you strong and steady. And he has chosen you to share in his eternal glory because you belong to Christ.* ^{1Pet.5:6-11NIrV}

We have been made right with God because of our faith. Now we have peace with him because of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith in Jesus we have received God's grace. In that grace we stand. We are full of joy because we expect to share in God's glory. And that's not all. We are full of joy even when we suffer. We know that our suffering gives us the strength to go on. The strength to go on produces character. Character produces hope. And hope will never let us down. God has poured his love into our hearts. He did it through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us. ^{Rom.5:1-3NIrV}

As we pray for the persecuted Church, let us pray with passion, persuasion and perseverance. Pray that we will all stay true to our Lord Jesus Christ in the sure and certain hope of a better Resurrection. And let us encourage one another not to yield to temptation but to ask God to deliver us from the evil one: *No matter what happens, live in a way that brings honour to the good news about Christ. Then I will know that you stand firm with one purpose. I may come and see you or only hear about you. But I will know that you work together as one person. And I will know that you work to spread the teachings of the good news. So don't be afraid in any way of those who oppose you. That will show them that they will be destroyed and that you will be saved. That's what God will do. Here is what he has given you to do for Christ. You must not only believe in him. You must also suffer for him. You are going through the same struggle you saw me go through. As you have heard, I am still struggling.* ^{Phil.1:27-30NIrV}

Remembrance Sunday November 11th 2012. Ps.82

Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day (11th November) was dedicated by King George V on 7th November 1919 as a Day of Remembrance for members of the armed forces who were killed during World War I. It has been observed in Commonwealth countries ever since to remember the members of their armed forces who have died in the line of duty. World War I Hostilities formally ended *at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month*, in accordance with the Armistice, signed by representatives of Germany and the Allies (which included the British Empire, France, the Russian Empire; Italy, Japan, Belgium, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Romania, the Czechoslovak legions and the USA) in 1918. The red Remembrance Poppy has become a familiar emblem of Remembrance Day due to the poem **“In Flanders Fields”** by Colonel John McCrae. These poppies bloomed across some of the worst battlefields of Flanders in World War I, their brilliant red colour an appropriate symbol for the blood spilled in the war.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

We remember with gratitude those who died to give us the freedom we so love and cherish – the liberty of democracy and the recourse to law when wronged. But the greatest freedom we have is spiritual freedom which also came with the price of blood – Jesus blood ...*the church of God, which he bought with the blood of his own Son.* ^{Acts 20:28}

Jesus paid the ultimate price for us and likened His death to sowing a seed: *Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to receive glory. What I'm about to tell you is true. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only one seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. "Anyone who loves his life will lose it. But anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it and have eternal life. Anyone who serves me must follow me. And where I am, my servant will also be. My Father will honour the one who serves me. "My heart is troubled. What should I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No. This is the very reason I came to this hour. Father, bring glory to your name!" Then a voice came from heaven. It said, "I have brought glory to my name. I will bring glory to it again.* ^{Jn.112:23-28NIrV} Because we have been bought with this price we now belong to God: *You are not your own; you were bought at a price.* ^{1Cor.6:19-20}

This freedom includes freedom from the fear of death: *But we do see Jesus already given a crown of glory and honour... He suffered death. By the grace of God, he tasted death for everyone. That is why he was given his crown... So Jesus became human like them in order to die for them. By doing that, he could destroy the one who rules over the kingdom of death. I'm talking about the devil. Jesus could set people free who were afraid of death. All their lives they were held as slaves by that fear... [Jesus] could serve God as a kind and faithful high priest. And then he could pay for the sins of the people by dying for them.* ^{Heb.2:9-15NIrV}

Death for Believers is not the “icy hands of the Grim Reaper” but the loving arms of our Heavenly Father calling us home: *The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.* ^{Deut.33:27} Jesus told a story of angels escorting Lazarus into eternity *“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.* ^{Lk.16:22} As Jesus died He committed His spirit to His Father: *Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.* ^{Lk.23:46} When Paul was in prison, he debated the pros and cons of living and dying: *I know that you are praying for me. I also know*

that the Spirit of Jesus Christ will help me. So no matter what happens, I'm sure I will still be saved. I completely expect and hope that I won't be ashamed in any way. I'm sure I will be brave enough. Now as always Christ will be lifted high through my body. He will be lifted up whether I live or die. For me, life finds all of its meaning in Christ. Death also has its benefits. Suppose I go on living in my body. Then I will be able to carry on my work. It will bear a lot of fruit. But what should I choose? I don't know. I can't decide between the two. I long to leave this world and be with Christ. That is better by far.^{Phil.1:19-23NLT}

The WW1 casualties from both Allies and Germans totalled 36 million including 16 million deaths. Very few places had no losses and these were called “Thankful Villages”. Initially there were 32 “Thankful Villages” in England and Wales (updated to 52 in 2010) but there were none in Scotland or Northern Ireland and only 1 in France! And if that was not bad enough, the “Spanish Flu” pandemic from January 1918 – December 1920 killed up to 50 million people world-wide. However neither war nor disease increases death because death is total in every generation and our natural bodies cannot last forever: *Brothers and sisters, here is what I'm telling you. Bodies made of flesh and blood can't share in the kingdom of God. And what dies can't share in what never dies. Listen! I am telling you a mystery. We will not all die. But we will all be changed. That will happen in a flash, as quickly as you can wink an eye. It will happen when the last trumpet sounds. The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised to live forever. And we will be changed. Our natural bodies don't last forever. They must be dressed with what does last forever. What dies must be dressed with what does not die. In fact, that is going to happen. What does not last will be dressed with what lasts forever. What dies will be dressed with what does not die. Then what is written will come true. It says, “Death has been swallowed up. It has lost the battle.”*^(Isa 25:8) *“Death, where is the battle you thought you were winning? Death, where is your sting?”*^(Hosea 13:14) *The sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law. But let us give thanks to God! He wins the battle for us because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done.*^{1Cor.15:50-57NirV} **In fact for the Believer, death is likened to falling asleep** *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.*^{Jn.11:11-13}

Today as we remember the Service men and women who died, let us also remember our Saviour Who died to give us greater freedom – and then continue to live in that freedom: *Christ has set us free. He wants us to enjoy freedom. So stand firm. Don't let the chains of slavery hold you again.*^{Gal.5:1NirV}

Sunday November 18th 2012 Ps.83 Acts 11

What is a Christian? *At Antioch the believers were called Christians for the first time.*^{Acts 11:26}

The early Church was very Missionary minded in line with Jesus' instructions: *and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*^{Acts 1:8} but being Jewish, they only preached to other Jews and Samaritans. **Then Peter got the revelation that the world that God so loved**^{Jn.3:16} **included EVERYONE and not just the Jews:** *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*^{Acts 10:34-35} Paul later explained that a true Jew was someone whose heart had been circumcised^{Rom.2:28} and whose spiritual father was Abraham.^{Gal.3:7} Actually, it is a person's spiritual not physical ancestry^{Phil.3:7-10} that is of any consequence to God: *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*^{Jn.3:3}

Initially the Believers were described as **People of the Way**^{Acts 9:2;22:4} and were called a **Nazarene sect**.^{Acts 24:5/14;28:22} The word translated *sect* is **αἵρεσις** from where we get *heresy* and means *to choose* thus *an opinion* and indicates a predilection for, or a perversion of, a particular truth - **hence a division** (in contrast to the uniting power of the “truth”). The early Church was essentially a group of Jews who worshipped God in the Judaistic rituals of priests and animal sacrifices as prescribed through Moses but who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. All the requirements of the Law were a practical illustration to help people understand the character and values of God and it took the Church some time to realise that they were only a stop-gap until the permanent solution to the world’s problems could be introduced. But whilst God’s plan was unfolding, the “stop-gap” of the Law with its rituals, had to continue until everything was in place: *But then the right time came. God sent his Son. A woman gave birth to him. He was born under the authority of the law. He came to set free those who were under the law. He wanted us to be adopted as children with all the rights children have.*^{Gal.4:3-5NIV} Although the OT rituals were extremely symbolic, the Jews were constantly reminded of their true meaning and knew that the coming Promised Messiah (Christ) would explain everything when He came to usher in a new Kingdom of Peace. *The gifts and sacrifices they offered were not enough. They were not able to remove the worshiper's feelings of guilt. They deal only with food and drink and different kinds of special washings. They are rules that deal with things outside our bodies. People had to obey them only until the new covenant came.*^{Heb.9:-10}

Then the Christ came exactly as God had foretold. He was: Eve’s Seed;^{Gen.3:15}
Abraham’s Seed and Blessing;^{Gen.12:7;Gal.3:16} **Jacob’s Kingly Seed;**^{Gen.35:11} **Judah’s Kingly Son;**^{Gen.49:10} **the Shoot from Jesse’s Stump;**^{Is.11:1} **David’s Son.**^{2Sam.7:12} **He was born of a Virgin;**^{Is.7:14} **named Jesus;**^{Is.62:11;Matt.1:21} **born in Bethlehem;**^{Micah 5:2} **exiled to Egypt;**^{Hosea11:1} **brought up in Galilee;**^{Is.9:1} **died on a cross;**^{Is.53;Ps.22:14;Deut.21:23} **raised from the dead;**^{Ps.16:8-11} **He ascended to heaven.**^{Ps.68:18}

When the Disciples preached that Jesus was God’s Christ, the people got angry because they were too comfortable in their traditions, even though they didn’t work and were obsolete: *This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place. He also speaks against the law. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place. He says Jesus will change the practices that Moses handed down to us.*^{Acts 6:13-14NIV} *The law can never make perfect those who come near to worship... But those offerings remind people of their sins every year. It isn't possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*^{Heb.10:1-3} *The old rule is done away with. It was weak and useless. The law didn't make anything perfect. Now a better hope has been given to us. That hope brings us near to God.*^{Heb.7:18-19NIV} *We have been made holy because Jesus Christ offered his body once and for all time.... The same sacrifices [offered] again and again... can never take away sins. Jesus our priest offered one sacrifice for sins for all time. Then he sat down at the right hand of God. ...By that one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*^{Heb.10:10-14}

People today still resist moving out from their comfort zone of traditional religion even though their consciences are not cleansed and still they feel guilty. They prefer the soporific effect of delusionment to the invigorating connection with God through Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ is the only way to God^{Jn.14:6} then anything that conflicts with Jesus’ teachings also conflicts with God and is detrimental to our spiritual, emotional and physical welfare: *What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator.*^{Is.45:9NLT} That is why we oppose the old way of religion where spiritual value is given to rituals, clothes, diets and status. **Sadly having tasted the new, people still prefer the old:** *And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the*

wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'^{Lk.5:37-39} **But the new supersedes the old and it really works!**

As the Church expanded they outgrew their original label of **Nazarene Sect** and were called **Christians (Christ-ians)** – little Christs because they followed Christ. **Jesus was their role model and example.**

Can you call yourself a Christ-ian? Do other people call you a Christian because you go to Church or do they call you a Christ-ian because they can see you follow Christ? Let's make sure there is enough evidence for people to legitimately call us Christ-ians as we model our life and conversation on Christ.

*I'm going to keep on talking like God, Feeding my body on His living Word.
Feeding my mind on what Jesus said, Changing my weakness for His strength instead.
His Word is true, His Word is real, Never depending on what I feel,
I'm going to say everything that He says, Speaking to mountains while He does the rest.
I'm going to let it settle on me, All of its truth is setting me free.
Becoming what God has made me to be, A joint heir with Jesus, I have liberty!*

Sunday 25th November 2012. Ps.142 Acts 12

Have you walked out of your prison yet?

He brought me out of prison that I might praise His name.^{Ps.142:7}

On 1st December 2012 the Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) is changing to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). The CRB checks (soon to be DBS checks) should disclose a person's criminal record in order to minimize the risk of repeat offending. As with all bureaucracy in this country, mythology and ignorance distorts the law, leaving many people fearful of officialdom and slaves to "red-tape"! Whilst there should be a stigma to criminality, the purpose of imposing a sentence is to pay for the crime and so when the sentence is served, the person is no longer a criminal but free. But in reality life is not that simple because man's heart is desperately wicked^{Jer.17:9} and many criminals continue to repeat their crimes; and so today it is almost impossible to work with people if you have a criminal record. Yet many of the strategic people in the early Church^{Heb.10:34;13:3} including the apostles, ^{Acts 5:18} James, ^{Acts 12:2} Peter, ^{Acts 12:8} Paul, ^{Acts 16} Silas, ^{Rom.16:7} Andronicus & Junia, ^{Col.4:10} Aristarchus, and ^{Philemon1:23} Epaphras had criminal records and spent time in prison. Some of the OT saints also spent time in prison including Joseph, Jeremiah, Sampson, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Moses and David each had a criminal record for murder!

The Gospel is about freedom. Jesus began His ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me. He has anointed me to tell the good news to poor people. He has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners. He has sent me so that the blind will see again. He wants me to free those who are beaten down. And he has sent me to announce the year when he will set his people free.*^{Lk.4:18} Jesus then went to say: *Today this passage of Scripture is coming true as you listen.*^{Lk.4:21}

The universal problem that mankind faces and struggles with is sin – all other difficulties stem from that. Sin is everything that opposes God, is less than His glory (perfect standard) or not of faith: *For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*^{Rom.3:23NLT} *Everything that is not based on faith is sin.*^{Rom.14:23} This struggle with sin appeared at the beginning of time: *Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why are*

you looking so sad? Do what is right. Then you will be accepted. If you don't do what is right, sin is waiting at your door to grab you. It longs to have you. But you must rule over it. ^{Gen.4:6-7}

A prison is a place of confinement where freedom is forfeited. There many sorts of “prisons” that can incarcerate us besides the edifices of state gaols built to detain criminals of prisoners or war. There are also “prisons” of sin, of guilt, of emotions, of our past – actually just about anything can confine and enslave us if we don’t master it.

God miraculously and dramatically released the apostles, ^{Acts 5:19} Peter ^{Acts 12} and Paul & Silas ^{Acts 16} from their prisons.

Sin and the (OT) law with its rituals is a prison and the key that unlocks the prison door is FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST: *But Scripture announces that the whole world is a prisoner because of sin. It does so in order that what was promised might be given to those who believe. The promise comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Before faith in Christ came, we were held prisoners by the law. We were locked up until faith was made known. So the law was put in charge until Christ came. He came so that we might be made right with God by believing in Christ. But now faith in Christ has come. So we are no longer under the control of the law. You are all children of God by believing in Christ Jesus.* ^{Gal.3:22-26} *Here is the law I find working in me. When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. Deep inside me I find joy in God's law. But I see another law working in the parts of my body. It fights against the law of my mind. It makes me a prisoner of the law of sin. That law controls the parts of my body. What a terrible failure I am! Who will save me from this sin that brings death to my body? I give thanks to God. He will do it through Jesus Christ our Lord.* ^{Rom.7:21-25}

Paul & Silas didn’t sulk, complain or get downhearted when they were in prison but *prayed and sang hymns of praise to God.* ^{Acts 16:25} Praise is not describing our problems or even asking God to help us but a *eulogy* - speaking well of God. Praise is saying (or singing) the truth - good things - about God. Here are some examples: *The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”* ^{Lk.23:47} *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles;* ^{2Cor.1:3-4} *You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.* ^{Ps.118:28-29} *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.* ^{Lk.1:46-49}

As Paul & Silas sang praise to God, their chains fell off! ^{Acts 16:25-26} This is an allegory for us - instead of worrying about our “prison” we should praise God and walk free from it and all its restraints. The Gospel is about freedom which Jesus procured for us at Calvary. We cannot buy this freedom because the price is too high **BUT** we can receive it as a gift. Praise shows that we have accepted God’s gift with gratitude and we have believed what He has said. If Jesus had kept reading from Isaiah, He would have said: *to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.* ^{Is.61:3}

Yes, praise will always displace despair. Let’s act on God’s Word and say with Jesus: *Today this passage of Scripture is coming true for us as we listen.* ^{Lk.4:21}

December: My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... For He that is mighty has done great things and holy is His name.

Luke 1:46-49

Sunday 2nd December 2012 Lk.1:46-55

God became a human being so we could become spiritual beings

The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.^{Jn.1:14}

Sin is opposition to God or rebellion against God and became a barrier between mankind and God. Although this barrier separated mankind and God, it has been removed by Jesus Christ. *At one time you were far away from God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. He spilled his blood for you. That has brought you near to God. Christ himself is our peace.*^{Eph.2:13-14}

When God became human at the Incarnation, Jesus was able to remove this sin-barrier by defeating the devil on the cross (by His obedience to the Father). Jesus did not do “hand-to-hand” combat with the devil nor did He play mind-games with him (like a sort of mental “arm wrestling”)! No! Jesus defeated the devil by yielding to God His Father and submitting to His will. Because Jesus was sinless by nature (and by practice), none of sin’s “dirt” could stick to Him. So when Jesus was killed, death was defeated; sin, the dangerous part (or sting) of death was removed. Jesus was never a slave to sin but by His death, Jesus delivered us from sin’s slavery so we are no longer dominated by sin. Because God became physical we can become spiritual.

Don't you know that when you give yourselves to obey someone you become that person's slave? You can be slaves of sin. Then you will die. Or you can be slaves who obey God. Then you will live a godly life. You used to be slaves of sin. But thank God that with your whole heart you obeyed the teachings you were given! You have been set free from sin. You have become slaves to right living. Because you are human, you find this hard to understand. So I have said it in a way that will help you understand it. You used to give the parts of your body to be slaves to unclean living. You were becoming more and more evil. Now give your bodies to be slaves to right living. Then you will become holy. Once you were slaves of sin. At that time right living did not control you. What benefit did you gain from doing the things you are now ashamed of? Those things lead to death! You have been set free from sin. God has made you his slaves. The benefit you gain leads to holy living. And the end result is eternal life. When you sin, the pay you get is death. But God gives you the gift of eternal life because of what Christ Jesus our Lord has done.^{Rom.6:16-23NIV}

Jesus is now the “connector” or Mediator between mankind and God: *For there is one God and one mediator (go-between) between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} Although sin is no longer a barrier, there is still a “chasm” between us and God and it is **FAITH** that enables us to make a “connection” with Him. God’s plan is complete and fully functioning but it still has to be “activated” - which is where **FAITH** comes in. **FAITH** is like electricity that makes a circuit alive. An electric circuit can be complete and fully functioning but until the electricity is connected it is **DEAD**. Once the power is switched on the electricity flows, it is **ALIVE!**

We can know about the Bible and recite many chapters; we can know about God and talk authoritatively about Christianity, but unless the “electricity” of **FAITH** connects us to God we are dead: *You were living in your sins and lawless ways. But in fact you were dead. You used to live as sinners when you followed the ways of this world. You served the one who rules over the spiritual forces of evil. He is the spirit who is now at work in those who don't obey God... But God loves us deeply. He is full of mercy. So he gave us new life because of what Christ has done. He gave us life even when we were dead in sin. God's grace has saved you. God's grace has saved you because of your*

faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can boast about earning it.^{Eph.2:1-10}

So what is FAITH?

FAITH is a gift: *Keep in mind the amount of faith God has given you.*^{Rom.12:3} Gifts have to be accepted: *He came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God.*^{Jn.1:11-12}

FAITH is believing: *Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!*^{Lk.1:45}

FAITH is acting on the authority of God's Word: *The man took Jesus at his word and departed... So he and his whole household believed.*^{Jn.4:50-53}

FAITH is a spirit: *It is written, "I believed, and so I have spoken." (Ps.116:10) With that same spirit of faith we also believe. And we also speak.*^{2Cor.4:13}

FAITH is a lifestyle: *For we live by faith, not by sight.*^{2Cor.5:7}

FAITH is confidence and certainty: *Faith is being sure of what we hope for. It is being certain of what we do not see... We have faith. So we understand that everything was made when God commanded it. That's why we believe that what we see was not made out of what could be seen.*^{Heb.11:1-3}

FAITH is voice activated:^{2Cor.4:13} *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*^{Rom.10:10}

God had to do a re-creative miracle for us in order for us to believe and this is called *New Birth* or being *Born-Again*. When a baby is born, its 1st cry tells everyone that it is alive and wants caring for. When we are *Born-Again* our 1st cry is "Lord help me" which shows that we are alive - and God will always answer this call for help: *Scripture says, "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ...and "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*^{Rom.10:11-12}. Once we are "connected" to God by **FAITH** we inseparable: *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*^{1Cor.6:17}

At our *Re-Birth* God makes His home in us: *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us.*^{Jn.1:14} The description of Mary's conception is good explanation of the mechanism of our *Re-Birth*: *The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of the Most High God will cover you. So the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God...nothing is impossible with God.*^{Lk.1:35-37} When Jesus was born, He was God's *One and Only*^{Jn.3:16} *Son*^{Heb.1:5} but at His Resurrection, He became the *Firstborn*^{Heb.12:23;Ps.89:27} *from the dead.*^{Rev.1:5;Col.1:13} Now He is the *Elder Brother of many brothers*^{Heb.2:10-18} and we can call God Almighty *Our Father*^{Matt.6:9}

It is a great blessing to believe that what God has said will really happen

You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.^{Lk.2:45}

Sunday 9th December 2012 Luke 2:1-20 Ps.84

The Shepherds and The Saviour

God foretold so many specific details of how the Messiah would come that when Jesus was born there should have been no doubt that He was the Christ, God's Answer to the world's problem – sin. The lawyers (Scribes) knew when and where the Messiah would be born but, like their forefathers before them, were only religious academics not Believers and so they rejected God's promise: *God's promise of enjoying his rest still stands. So be careful that none of you fails to receive it. The good news was preached to our people long ago. It has also been preached to us. The message they heard didn't have any value for them. They didn't combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enjoy that rest.*^{Heb.4:1-3}

The Christmas Story has been so romanticised, especially by our Victorian carols, that it now bears very little resemblance to the Bible narratives. The Bible has no mention of

snow or donkeys. There are no “3 Kings” with camels and certainly no “Santa Claus” with reindeer or Christmas trees decorated with candles and tinsel! **In all probability Jesus was born in April at the Feast of Passover (13-27 April) 5B.C.** (see *The Star of Bethlehem* by Colin Humphreys - available from our website: www.dealpentecostal.co.uk).

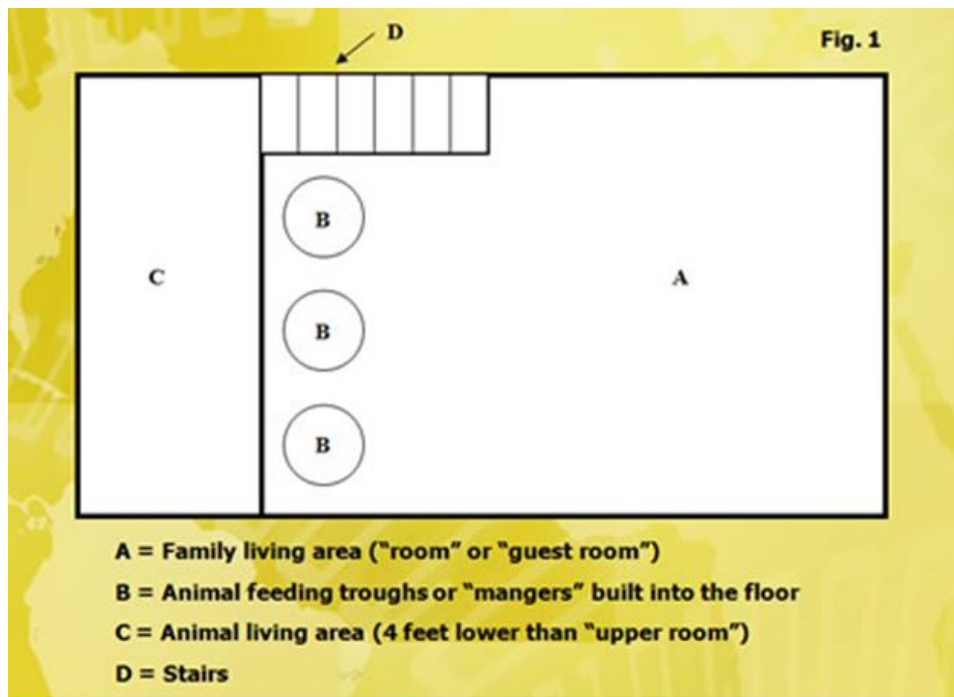
However because we **celebrate the Person** not the provenance, the exact details are not our focus and December 25th has now become Jesus’ “official” Birthday - rather like the Queen’s Official birthday which is celebrated on the 1st or 2nd Saturday in June.

The word “Inn” (where there was no room for Joseph and Mary) is misleading and so the 2010 NIV uses “*guest room*”: *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*^{Lk.2:6-7} The 1st English translation by John Wycliffe in 1385 accurately translates it *chamber*: *And she bare her firstborn son, and wrapped him in clothes, and put him in a cratch [feed-trough], for there was no place to him in no chamber.* This word “*chamber*” is the same word that Luke used for the **Upper Room** where Jesus held the Last Supper: *The Teacher asks, “Where is the guest room? Where can I eat the Passover meal with my disciples?” He will show you a large upstairs room with furniture in it. Prepare for us to eat there.*^{Lk.22:11-12}

The word for an hotel style “*inn*” where anyone can stay is very different and used in the Good Samaritan story: *But a Samaritan came to the place where the man was. When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him. He went to him, poured olive oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey. He took him to an inn and took care of him.*^{Lk.10:33-34} This word translated here as “*inn*” means “*a house for the reception of strangers.*”

Bethlehem (meaning **House of Bread**) was historically significant because it was the place of **Rebekah’s burial**^{Gen.35:19} and **King David’s birth**.^{1Sam.17:12} Also, the Scriptures foretold that the **Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (David’s birthplace) as he would be one of David’s descendants**: *The LORD says, “Bethlehem, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come a ruler over Israel for me. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago.” Bethlehem was also called Ephrathah.*^{Micah 5:2} Unlike the urban metropolis of Jerusalem, just 6 miles away, the “city” of Bethlehem was just a hamlet. But being so close to Jerusalem it would get very busy at the time of the main religious festivals when tens of thousands of Jews would visit the Temple.

Joseph’s family home was in Bethlehem and Mary’s relatives also lived nearby. Her cousin Elizabeth lived in the *hill country of Judea*^{Lk.1:39} (i.e. near Bethlehem) and Mary had just spent 3 months with her. So it would be reasonable to expect them to stay with their relatives in a “Guest Chamber” not an Inn (*a house for the reception of strangers*)! If, as Humphreys argues, Jesus was born at Passover, then the accommodation near Jerusalem would be very cramped because everyone living nearby would have been hosting relatives and friends. It is estimated that over a million pilgrims visited Jerusalem at the Feast of Passover, (the Temple plaza of 144,000m² could accommodate 400,000 people) which shows how busy Jerusalem could be! The diagram below shows the floor plan of a typical rural home at the time of Jesus. At busy times, like Passover, the *Guest Chamber* would have been full but the area where the animals ate would also have used for visitors. The manger was in the family room above the place where the animals slept and was a bowl scraped out of the floor. This is where Mary laid Jesus and where the Shepherds found Him.



The Shepherds had been told by the Angel that this was a momentous day: *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Here is how you will know I am telling you the truth. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.*^{Lk.2:10-12}

Too often we forget how joyful and blessed Christianity is! But the blessing is for those who are favoured by God: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.*^{Lk.2:14} The Greek word translated *favour* literally means *to think well of*. Although God loves the whole world^{Jn.3:16} without faith we cannot please God, so for God to think well of us we must believe Him: *Without faith it isn't possible to please God. Those who come to God must believe that he exists. And they must believe that he rewards those who look to him.*^{Heb.11:6} Our faith is dead (useless) unless we put it into action: *It is the same with faith. If it doesn't cause us to do something, it's dead.*^{Jas.2:17} The Shepherds believed God's announcement and then acted on it. How fitting that the Great Shepherd^{Heb.13:20} should be visited by other Shepherds who believed God, rather than the national and religious officials who scorned Him.

When God's Messiah (Christ) came, Micah's prophecy was being fulfilled:

Bethlehem... out of you will come a ruler over Israel for me... The LORD will hand his people over to their enemies. That will last until the promised ruler is born. Then his relatives in Judah will return to their land. The LORD will rule over them and the people of Israel. The promised ruler will stand firm and take care of his flock. The LORD will give him the strength to do it. The LORD his God will give him the authority to rule. His people will live safely. His greatness will reach from one end of the earth to the other. And he will bring them peace.^{Micah 2:1-5}

Let's be like the Shepherds who believed God's Good News, talked about it and then acted on it!

After the shepherds had seen [Jesus] they told everyone. They reported what the angel had said about this child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary kept all these things like a secret treasure in her heart. She thought about them over and over. The shepherds returned. They gave glory and praise to God. Everything they had seen and heard was just as they had been told.^{Lk.2:17-20}

Sunday 16th 2012 Ps.85 Matt.2:1-15 Are you wiser than a King?

Are you wiser than a King?

Throughout history there have been good kings and bad kings, wise kings and foolish kings. A good king looks after the welfare of his people even at his own expense and a bad king looks for his own pleasure at the expense of others. *A wise king gets rid of evil people. He runs the threshing wheel over them... Love and truth keep a king safe. Faithful love makes his throne secure.* ^{Prov.20:26-28} *By justice a king gives a country stability, but those who are greedy for bribes tear it down.* ^{Prov.29:4} Even though a Monarch is only human like you and me, the status of Sovereign instils awe and respect. For instance the introduction to the AV Bible (1611) is dedicated to King James: *To the most high and mightie Prince, James by the grace of God King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, &c. The translators of The Bible, wish Grace, Mercie, and Peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. ...The appearance of your MAJESTIE, as of the Sunne in his strength, instantly dispelled those supposed and surmised mists, and gave unto all that were well affected, exceeding cause of comfort...*

Facts are often diffused over time with mythology which mystifies the stories so we end up with heroes who are very different from the actual historical people involved. For instance, Richard the Lionheart⁽¹¹⁵⁷⁻¹¹⁹⁹⁾ of Robin Hood fame did not speak English (he was Norman) and only spent six months of his 10 year reign in England! He siphoned England's resources to support his Crusades and his laws instigated a great massacre of Jews in London and York. Actually King John was a "better" king than his brother Richard although he continually went back on his word until his Barons rebelled and insisted he sign the Magna Carta⁽¹²¹⁵⁾ which brought the king under the law. Lord Denning described the Magna Carta as "the greatest constitutional document of all times – the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot." Probably our best Ruler was Oliver Cromwell during the *Commonwealth of England*⁽¹⁶⁴⁹⁻¹⁶⁶⁰⁾ when England was a Republic. We had religious freedom and Jews were again permitted to remain in England to trade. But this freedom came at a price – Cromwell had to sack the corrupt politicians and for a while rule as a dictator! After Cromwell died, our freedom was again restricted. Between 1661-1665, Charles II's Lord Chancellor (the 1st Earl of Clarendon) introduced a series of four legal statutes (known as the Clarendon Code) which effectively re-established the supremacy of the Anglican Church and ended toleration for dissenting religions. It included Corporation Act (1661) which required all municipal officials to take Anglican Communion and the Five-Mile Act (1665) which was aimed at Nonconformist ministers who were forbidden from coming within 5 miles of incorporated towns (i.e. towns with their own council) or the place of their former livings. They were also forbidden to teach in schools. This act was not rescinded until 1812.

The Jews also had a mixture of good/wise and bad/foolish kings: *He did evil in the eyes of the LORD,* ^{2Kg.8:27} *He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD... The high places, however, were not removed,* ^{2Kg.15:3} *Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God.* ^{2Kg.16:2} *He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.* ^{2Kg.22:2} King Herod was not a Jew but was from Edom and given the title "king of Judea" by Rome. He was very affluent and influential, bailing out the cash-strapped Olympic Games in 12BC. He built Caesarea Maritima, (a brand new city and harbour whose facilities would be a credit to any port today) and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Married 10 times, Herod was described as "a

madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis” – he was renowned for murder of his wife (uxoricide), brothers (fratricide), sons (filicide) and children (infanticide)! So it not surprising that the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem^{Matt.2:16} isn’t mentioned in historical books.

Herod had no legal right the Jewish throne and neither had he any intention of acknowledging *the one who has been born king of the Jews*^{Matt.2:2} even though he pretended to want to pay homage to Jesus!^{Matt.2:8} The Magi, who were renowned as “wise-men”, really did want to pay homage to this Baby who was *born king of the Jews* and their reward was an audience with the King of Kings who had created the Universe. What would you do if you had a face-to-face audience with the King of Kings? The Magi *were filled with joy... [they] bowed down and worshiped him. Then they gave [to] him...*^{Matt.2:10-11}

Last week we saw that Christianity is blessed and that this blessedness brings peace for those who are favoured by God: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.*^{Lk.2:14} Blessed means joy, happiness and contentment (which is an attitude of the heart when one is at peace with God). Contentment leads to gratitude which will always result in praise (saying good things about God). We cannot really worship God unless we are *filled with joy* because worship is a spiritual activity: *But a new time is coming. In fact, it is already here. True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. They are the kind of worshipers the Father is looking for. God is spirit. His worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:23-24}

Social status means nothing to God – not even religious status (if there is such a thing!). Paul said: *I am not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles,” even though I am nothing.*^{2Cor.12:11; also 2Cor.11:5} *For we ...are the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials – though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more... But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ... My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*^{Phil.3:3-11NET}

Wisdom is doing something with our knowledge and should be our primary goal in life: *Get wisdom. Get understanding. Don't forget my words. Don't turn away from them. Stay close to wisdom, and she will keep you safe. Love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is best. So get wisdom. No matter what it costs, get understanding. Value wisdom, and she will lift you up. Hold her close, and she will honour you. She will set a beautiful crown on your head. She will give you a glorious crown.*^{Prm.4:5-9} **True Wisdom is Jesus:** *Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free.*^{2Cor.1:30}

The truly wise aren’t those who say they will worship Jesus, but those who actually do.

Let’s be wiser than a king and emulate the wise men who worshipped Jesus as King. *But wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it.*^{Lk.7:35NLT}

Sunday December 23rd 2012 Ps.86

It’s Christmas!

Christmas is known by a variety of names including: Advent, Midwinter, Nativity, Noel, Xmas and Yuletide. Over time many myths have been added to the Biblical narrative – many with a commercial emphasis! Yet the real reason for Christmas is to remember the birth of Jesus, truly Human (Mary’s Son) yet truly God (God’s Son) – it His “official

birthday"! *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.*^{Jn.1:14}

Christmas Cards: In 1843 George Cole (who had been involved in the introduction of the Penny Post 3 years earlier) commissioned the printing of 2,050 Christmas cards selling at 1/- (1 shilling) each. The card had no Christian message but pictured a family with a small child drinking wine together! Cole was a shrewd businessman and had started a great commercial trend - in 2008 there were 668.9 million Christmas cards sold in the UK!

The singing of Christmas Carols is another tradition that has evolved over the centuries. "Carol" is from the Latin "*carula*" meaning to dance in a circle. What started as singing praises to God in celebration of the birth of Jesus, now incorporates all the festivities of the season and much more! Our Carols now include everything from pure theology, such as *Angels from the realms of glory*, to the pure romantic fantasies of *I'm dreaming of a white Christmas* - and everything else in between.

Father Christmas (Santa Claus), who is now such an integral part of Christmas, was a real person - Saint Nicholas. He lived in Myra (Turkey) in the 4th Century and was famous for his generous gifts to the poor. The real facts have been embellished over the centuries by local folklore from different countries to become fantastic myth we have today! For many people, sadly, God has been relegated to a myth and been replaced by Father Christmas. (In Victorian times Father Christmas had a green suit!)

The giving of presents in celebration of great events is ancient. In the 5th Century B.C the Jews were instructed to: *celebrate annually ...the time when [they] got relief from their enemies... when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration... to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.*^{Ether 9:21-22}

An even greater event than this occurred at the 1st Christmas when God became human and rescued us from our greatest enemy – sin: *The baby inside Mary is from the Holy Spirit... You must give him the name Jesus. That is because he will save his people from their sins... She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Emmanuel... [which means] "God with us."*^{Matt.1:20-23} So it is right at we should celebrate "relief from our enemy" (sin) with *feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.*

In Mary's Song (the Magnificat) she sings that *God has brought down rulers from their thrones. But he has lifted up people who are not important. He has filled those who are hungry with good things. But he has sent those who are rich away empty.*^{Lk.1:52-53}

At this season of festivities, which category do you fall into? The hungry who God fills with good things or the rich that God sends away empty? The "hungry" and the "rich" are not those who don't have money or do have money, but are those who need God or those who don't need God. Jesus explained that God's kingdom is available to those who realise their need of Him: *Blessed are those who are spiritually needy. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are those who are sad. They will be comforted. Blessed are those who are free of pride. They will be given the earth. Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for what is right. They will be filled. Blessed are those who show mercy. They will be shown mercy. Blessed are those whose hearts are pure. They will see God. Blessed are those who make peace. They will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who suffer for doing what is right. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them.*^{Matt.5:3-10}

One of the great attributes of God is that He does not change: *I am the LORD. I do not change.*^{Mal.3:6} So, if we are "rich" (i.e. we don't need God), we will be sent away empty! But if we are "hungry" (i.e. we need God), then He will fill us with good things. The greatest

Gift that God can give us is relief from our sins. He did this with Jesus *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*^{Jn.1:29} A good conscience is perhaps the most valuable asset we can have: *holding on to faith and a good conscience,*^{1Tim.1:19} *They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.*^{1Tim.3:9} *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.*^{1Pet.3:15-16} *Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.*^{1Tim.6:6-8}

Gifts can be accepted or rejected. When Jesus was born: *the world did not recognize him. [Jesus] came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God. To be a child of God has nothing to do with human parents. Children of God are not born because of human choice or because a husband wants them to be born. They are born because of what God does.*^{Jn.1:10-13}

Human nature does not change and we are no different today from the Bible times: *Some were convinced by what [Paul] said [about Jesus], but others would not believe.*^{Acts.28:24}

It would be very sad to give and receive gifts this Festive Season but miss out on the very best.

So let's celebrate Christmas with friends, family, food and fun and presents to remember Jesus' Birthday and also that wonderful gift of freedom from sin that God gives to those who believe.

**Wishing you a very Blessed and Joyful Christmas
as you acknowledge**

**Jesus
as the
Reason for the Season**



The 1st Commercial Christmas Card (1843)

Sunday December 30th 2012 Ps.87 Luke 2:21-40

Out with the old and in with the new - How will you start the New Year?

Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel.^{Lk.2:29-32NASB}

Democracy is good and well worth fighting for (literally!) but it is not found in Scripture! God intended to rule Israel as their King but realised they would eventually rebel and so He gave Moses clear instructions about what a King should do.^{Deut.17:14-20} Actually these are very similar to the instructions Paul gave for Elders.^{1Tim.3; Tit.1} Whilst God allowed the Israelites to have a Monarchy, He did not mention Democracy! This is because the Israelites were a real life picture of the spiritual truths that God wanted us to understand: *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*^{Rom.15:4}

A good ruler (even a totalitarian ruler) is a blessing whilst a bad ruler is a curse: *By justice a king gives a country stability, but those who are greedy for bribes tear it down... If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked.*^{Prov.29:4-12} Our English word “despot” comes from the Greek word **δεσπότης** (despotēs) which Luke uses for Lord: *Now **Lord**, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace...*^{Lk.2:29} This does not suggest that God is tyrannical but rather He is in total charge of every circumstance – hence *Sovereign Lord* in the NIV. **God cannot even be tempted with sin let alone do anything wrong:** *When you are tempted, you shouldn't say, “God is tempting me.” God can't be tempted by evil. And he doesn't tempt anyone. But your own evil longings tempt you. They lead you on and drag you away. When they are allowed to grow, they give birth to sin. When sin has grown up, it gives birth to death. My dear brothers and sisters, don't let anyone fool you. Every good and perfect gift is from God. It comes down from the Father. He created the heavenly lights. He does not change like shadows that move.*^{Jas.1:13-17NIV} *Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.*^{Ps.96:13}

Abraham made a similar statement when confronted with the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*^{Gen.18:25} **Yes! God is good: You are good, and what you do is good;**^{Ps.119:68} *The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.*^{Nahum 1:7}

Simeon was waiting for the *Consolation of Israel.*^{Lk.2:25} This word in the Greek is **παράκλησις** (paraklēsis) which is also translated *promise, encouragement and comfort* and has the same root as **Advocate**. *But the **Advocate**, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*^{Jn.14:26}

Simeon was told that he would not die until he had seen the Christ (Messiah)^{Lk.2:26} and he knew that this Christ would usher in the coming Kingdom of God and bring God's Salvation.

How do we see God's Salvation?

We see God's Salvation in the Person of Jesus: but very few have actually physically seen Him. However if we did we would very soon doubt our “experience” because our memory is unreliable.

We see God's Salvation in the Pages of Scripture. Peter placed more value on the Scripture than his own dramatic experience: *I hope that you will always be able to remember these things after I'm gone. I will try very hard to see that you do. We told you about the time our Lord Jesus Christ came with power. But we didn't make up stories when we told you about it. With our own eyes we saw him in all his majesty. ...We ourselves heard the voice that came from heaven. We were*

with him on the sacred mountain. The word of the prophets is made more certain. We have that word. You must pay attention to it. It is like a light shining in a dark place. It will shine until the day Jesus comes. Then the Morning Star will rise in your hearts ...the Holy Spirit guided the prophets as they spoke. So prophecy comes from God.^{2Pet.1:15-20}

We see God's Salvation in other People:

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.^{2Tim.2:2} *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*^{1Cor.11:1} *Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.*^{Phil.3:17} *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*^{Phil.4:9}

Once Simeon had seen Jesus, he declared that God was releasing him in peace.^{Lk.2:29-32} But peace doesn't come from kind deeds, good behaviour or even prayer – peace comes from knowing God and Jesus: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} We will only live in peace when we know God and see Jesus as our Saviour.

We need our spiritual “eyes” opened to be able to know God: *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*^{Eph.1:18-19}

Jesus ministry was to open eyes: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*^{Lk.4:18-19}

This is also our ministry: *I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.*^{Is.42:6-7} *I am Jesus... I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*^{Acts26:15-18}

Let's make sure that we are released from this year to start 2013 with God's peace i.e. blessed, content, complete, friendly, happy, joyful, prosperous, safe and sound!

January: The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him. **Nahum 1:7**

February: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

March: I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before Him. **Ecclesiastes 8:12**

April: My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.

Ps.119:50

May: Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves; **Psalms 68:19-20**

June: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **Philippians 4:6**

July: And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Philippians 4:7**

August: Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." **Psalms 91:1-2**

September: Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. **Romans 12:12**

October: Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? **John 14:1**

November: And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. **Colossians 3:17**

December: My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... For He that is mighty has done great things and holy is His name.

Luke 1:46-49